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SPEED WESTERN STORIES

A SPEED MAGAZINE

PARSON ON THE PROD

by E. Hoffmann Price

OUTGUESS THE WEATHERMAN

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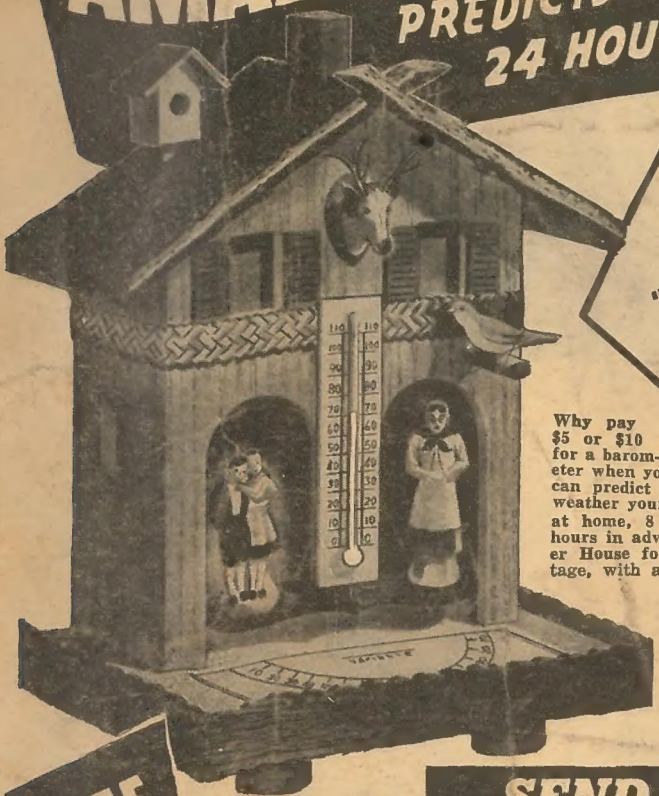

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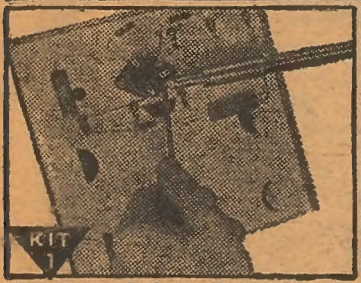

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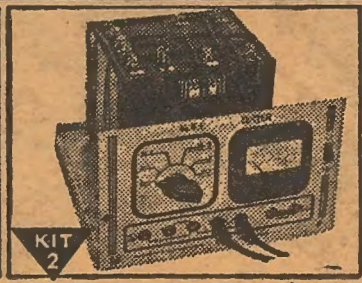

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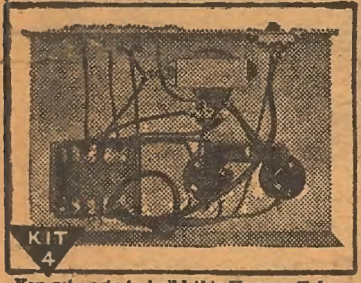

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SPEED · WESTERN · STORIES

March, 1946 Vol. 6, No. 1

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DISCOUNT TO DISCHARGED VETERANS—SPECIAL TUITION RATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

Uniform of the West

By CHARLES IRWIN

A ROARING CROWD gathered at the dock. Arrival of a ship from around the Horn meant mail day to the citizenry of what was then the shack town, San Francisco. If a man wasn't lucky enough to get a letter, he could at least learn news of home from the passengers. That was in 1850, when the far-flung cry of *California gold* was reaching all ends of the earth.

One passenger, a new arrival of twenty, was singled out by a burly miner. "Where yuh from, friend?" the miner asked. Soil from the diggin's was fresh upon the miner.

"New York," the young tenderfoot replied. He was a man of medium height, rotund. His round face carried a friendly smile and chin whiskers, a fashion of the day.

The miner pointed to the youngster's baggage. "What yuh got there?" he inquired curiously.

"That's my grubstake," the newcomer told him. "Canvas. I'd like to sell it to a tentmaker."

The miner snorted. "Tentmaker, hell!" he exclaimed. "What we need up at the diggin's is pants—*strong* pants!"

"Yes?" The young man thought that over a moment. Then he said, "Lead the way to a tailor."

The miner complied.

The young man left a roll of his canvas fabric with the tailor.

"Make some pants out of this for my friend and me," he ordered.

So the tailor made them.

The miner was mighty pleased with his new pants. He strutted around town showing them off. "Look at these," he told the other miners. "I'll be danged if a man ever had pants *this* strong before!"

"Where'd yuh git 'em?" one of his pards asked.

"From my pal—Levi Strauss!"

"Wal, where in tarnation do we find this Levi Strauss?"

The young New Yorker, Levi Strauss, had hardly got his land legs back before all his canvas was gone—made into work pants, instead of tents.

He then sent a message back to his two brothers in the East, via a sea skipper, to ship more fabrics, especially canvas and duck, for stout work clothes. Meanwhile, Levi journeyed to Sacramento, better to study the clothing needs of the gold seekers. Sacramento was the jump-off to the mines.

By 1853, Levi Strauss was financially able to open his first large-scale factory. He finally adopted denim as the strongest fabric for his waist overalls. The name had its origin in Nimes, France, which was famous for weaving cloth. "Serge de Nimes" was the name they gave it. Next it was shortened to "de Nimes," then to "denim." At first, denim was made in but three colors, light blue, brown and gray. Two pieces were seldom dyed the same shade. Levi Strauss induced the mills to supply him with a new color—indigo blue, in unvarying shade.

IN the late '60's, Levi was visited by a customer from over Nevada way. He was one Jacob Davis, a tailor of the gold-boom camp, Virginia City. The town got its name in an unusual manner. James Fennimore, of Virginia, called "Ol Virginy," accidentally stumbled one day and broke the quart bottle of red-eye he was toting. Ruefully, he watched the whiskey spread over the road, sinking into the dust.

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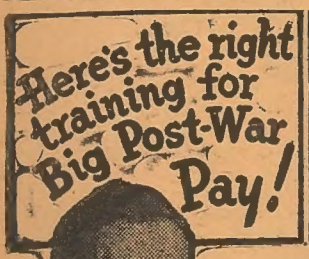
I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO SUCCEED IN RADIO



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PARSON ON THE PROD

"I knew a Mexican priest who could straighten a horse-shoe with his bare hands," the girl told him. "Just because you're a clergyman doesn't mean you have to be a weakling!" Gilman resented her lecture, but it was from his Chinese friend, Ah Hing, that the young doctor of divinity learned the important values that go into the make-up of a man

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Gilman screeched: "Cease at once, you uncouth brute!" And smacked him with the flatiron.

HE HAD NOT yet got used to the glare of Dripping Springs main street, and he stood there, blinking behind thick-lensed glasses, when the first well-dressed woman he'd seen in that dreary cow-town came up to accost him.

Her silk petticoats rustled alluringly. Her high heels tock-tocked on the board walk. She wore a prim lace collar, and a lace jabot, but she had vitality, an inner glow which shone through her clear skin and level eyes, and mocked her sedate dress.

"Dr. Gilman," she began.

He started, surprised at being addressed by name, within a few minutes after getting off the train.

Her heel caught in one of the many knotholes in the board walk. She cried out, reached for support, and caught at him before his slow-paced wits could react! Belatedly, fumblingly, and getting red at the ears, he caught her under the arms. By then she was smiling, her balance back again.

Just the man she wanted, though she feared he'd be too frail for the job. Pity colored her warm smile and softened

those dark, intense eyes as her doubts grew, even before she could speak.

His face was long and thin and sallow. Pale blue eyes with pupils grotesquely minimized by the thick lenses were still coming to uncertain focus. His broad mouth was busy gulping embarrassment. A disturbing young person, this woman, and his being disturbed by a woman was practically unheard of.

"I snooped and looked at the register," she explained, "and the clerk said you'd be here permanently. So you might help me. You're educated."

Horace Wilbur Gilman, D. D., smiled wryly, and fumbled the brim of his soft hat. "Yes, in a way. They decided years ago I was hopeless for the army, and not rugged enough to practise law, like my uncle, Joash Gilman. So I was hustled to a theological seminary.

"I'm Eve Stirling, I'm teaching school; my contract hasn't expired." She twisted the good-sized diamond solitaire on her fourth finger. "I can't leave them in the lurch, and—" Her smile was dazzling now. "You could take my place, the trustees would be thrilled to death, having an educated man. And you'd still be able to preach."

"But I do not intend to preach. I have no such inclination. It was merely to humor my mother. She felt I should be sheltered. Rather, she felt I was utterly useless. She was of course, quite right."

EVE STIRLING spent a moment wondering. "For a cowtown school, it's really very orderly. There was only one ruffian, and I whaled the daylights out of him with a quirt. He was well behaved ever after, and anyway, he's graduated, after three years in the eighth grade."

Gilman shuddered. "You have been very frank, Miss Stirling. But the truth is, I've come to take possession of my late uncle's ranch. The. . . . ah. . . Rafter J-G."

"Oh. *That* Gilman?" she exclaimed incredulously.

He gulped. "Ah. . . was he so shocking?"

Eve laughed softly. "Oh, no, not exactly."

"You mean, I do not resemble him."

"Hardly, Dr. Gilman. He used to sit on the edge of the horse trough, drinking whiskey out of a gold-embroidered boot. And shooting sparrows with his .45. And singing. Not hymns, of course."

Gilman frowned. "Is that really necessary, to manage a cattle ranch? I mean, a person of sedentary habits, given a few reliable cowboys, should do well enough. There is grass, which the Lord provides, and then the cattle, they. . . ah. . . . increase and multiply. Which gave Uncle Joash ample time for unusual amusements."

Eve's eyes grew very wide. She tightened her lips to keep from laughing, and at the same time, she wanted to cry from pure sympathy. Instead of doing any of these things, she drew a deep breath. "You couldn't posibly consider teaching school as a way of occupying your idle time?"

"The unusual customs of the country—I assure you I intend no impertinence, but why must you cancel your contract? Your health—you fairly glow with vitality."

"Thank you. The truth is, I'm engaged to marry Watson Barstow, and he's plumb tired of waiting until the term is finished."

This nettled Gilman. "I'm afraid I'll be quite busy for some time, administering my legacy."

She bade him good-day, and went on. Gilman sniffed the perfume which lingered where she had been. He resented Watson Barstow. He also resented himself, and for the first time, consciously. He'd not missed Eve's conviction that he was probably too frail to be equal to the chore of commanding a cow country school, but any port in a storm. Cattle multiplied by themselves, whereas arithmetic of any kind required force in school.

Gilman went to the livery stable to get a rig. As he set out for the Rafter

J-G, he said bitterly, "It is fortunate that drinking whiskey out of a boot is not essential to managing an estate. I do believe that that young lady actually considered such to be evidence of manliness."

Eve was only a trifle younger than Gilman; he merely looked a lot older.

COTTONWOODS shaded the weather beaten Rafter J-G ranch house. The roof was swaybacked. Most of the windows were missing. But smoke came from the cook's shack, and cowpunchers lounged betwixt corral and bunk house. A stumpy little man with a square face and drooping white mustache ambled toward the hitching post to greet Gilman.

"Howdy. Light and set. We're fixing to chaw a biscuit."

It was clear that they took him for a belated traveler. Gilman cleared his throat, and said hesitantly, "I am the new owner."

Stubby Jordan's eyes widened. Otherwise his ruddy face did not change expression. "You're Gilman, D. D. We're jest about ready to tie on the feed bag, reverend."

"If you please, omit the 'reverend.' I am not a minister of the gospel. I never was."

Stubby poked out a gnarled hand. "Well, sir, never going bad is lots better'n having to reform. Don't pay no attention to the boys, they're rough spoken sons, only they got good hearts. You don't look much like your Uncle Joash, now he was a ring-tailed heller, and what with practicing law, and maintaining order at Smooth Bore Kate's place, he sort of let things go to pot out here."

The following day, Gilman got in the buckboard with Stubby. He couldn't ride, he decided, after having been piled three times by the gentlest nag of the *remuda*. During the drive, Stubby became silent and grimly reflective.

"This here," he finally said, pointing to a pond fringed by willows, "is what makes the Rafter J-G valuable. Spring fed, and dammed up to hold the water."

"You take a fancy way of calling me a liar!" Stubby flared.

"Where are the cattle?"

Stubby made a vague gesture. "Ain't hardly any left. Your uncle said it was easier to make money or lose it playing stud poker. We ain't been out here for months afore he cashed in. We jest come back when we heard you was on your way out here from N'yawk."

"Then you've not shipped any cattle."

"Course not."

Gilman's mouth tightened, and behind his thick lensed spectacles he tried to look severe. "See here, my man! Cattle increase and multiply. Since you've not shipped any, what has happened to them? Do not try to deceive me, simply because I am a newcomer."

At first Stubby could hardly believe what he'd heard. After some seconds he flared, "You take a fancy way of calling me a liar! Now if you wasn't a damn' preacher, I'd knock your damn' head off, if you wasn't wearing them damn' glasses. Your cow critters increaseth and multiply, eh, and what did I do with

'em?" He spat. "Git in that wagon, or walk to the house."

IT WAS NOT a pleasant drive. Stubby whipped the horses every jump. Gilman barely managed to keep from piling out.

When Stubby pulled up at the hitch-rack, he said, "You probably didn't aim to call me a liar. But you're a pure fool, reverend, and my advice is, practice law; you got book-learning and you look it. I'm quitting. So's the rest. They were a-honing to quit at the first sight of you, but I made 'em stay, account of your Uncle Joash."

Within the hour, everyone but Pablo, the one-eyed cook, was gone. Mrs. Pablo was already loading a burro with her household gear. The Mexican doffed his hat, smiled amiably. *"Señor,* you do well to fire those *cabrones,* they are not good.

"Now, when you hire new ones, good men like you ought to have, I, Pablo Miramante sy Pacheco, who kisses your hands, will come back to make the cooking."

Another bow, another sweep of the hat, and he went back to sit at the foot of a tree, and watch his wife finish packing.

Gilman was on the verge of tears. For the first time in his life, he neared high fury, and didn't know what to do about it.

Toward sunset, Gilman realized he also would have to leave. He had a hard time hitching up the livery horse. His arms ached. His glasses were be-slobbered before he got the bit in the nag's mouth. Somehow, he got the harness flung on. Then he began to wonder whether it wasn't too late to set out for Dripping Springs.

Looking toward town, he saw a rider approaching. The man loomed up mightily against the sinking sun. The prodigious shadow slanting a bit to the left of him magnified his bulk. Red glint came from silver conchas. Curb chains tinkled, spurs jingled. And as the man came nearer, Gilman noted the belted gun, the wiry black van Dyke beard, the massive nose. The newcomer made Gilman think of the men pictured on Buffalo Bill circus posters. Here was a man in the tradition, and not a scummy lout in bleached levis and dirty shirt.

The man dismounted. He flung the reins over his horse's head. The animal was bay with black points, it gleamed like silk; a small, neat brand, Circle WB, made a medallion on the shoulder.

"Howdy, Mr. Gilman?" Without waiting for answer, he went on. "I thought so. Look like him," A sweeping gesture. "Buy the whole shebang. Thousand dollars cash on the barrel head."

"My goodness!" Gilman blinked, took off his glasses to polish them. "The buildings are worth more than that. Then the land—my man said that the pond, over there—"

The magnificent man chuckled. There was something iron about the smooth sound, as of a sword whisking from a scabbard.

"That pond won't be worth a dime if the dam busts. And it's liable to bust. Look here, reverend, we're fed up with Joash Gilman's hogging all the water, but we put up with it patiently. That's done. Take a thousand, or get the hell out."

"I'll see an attorney," Gilman finally quavered.

The big man was mounting up. He didn't bother to answer.

Gilman, creaking at the joints, got into the buggy. He clucked at the nag, and started for town. Behind him, a pistol blazed. Bullets smacked through the top of the buggy. The livery nag bolted.

"Whoa—whoa—confound you, whoa!" Gilman screeched.

The harness went wrong. The buggy tipped, spilling Gilman. The horse broke loose, to race for town. And it was not until he had trudged a weary mile that Gilman realized that he'd lost his purse: money, drafts, and all.

Life could be vexatious at times.

CHAPTER II

The Laundry

AROUND NOON, the following day, Gilman dragged himself into Dripping Springs. One lens had been smashed. Taking the glasses off entirely was bad, and going with one eye uncorrected was worse, though in a different way. Everything became a duplex blur. But he heard the hazy figures of the town commenting, and knew that the return of the livery nag, the night just past, had furnished amusement, not alarm.

"Poor tenderfoot had a tough time of it. . . . ."

"That ain't no way to talk about a preacher. . . ."

"Preacher, you're loco; he was schooled fer a missionary; he can convert Lim Ah Hing, don't need to go all the way to China. . . ."

Then came a friendly voice. It was Eve Stirling, whom he could not see too clearly. "Oh, Dr. Gilman, I'm so sorry. I've been worried."

"That was kind of you."

"Now since you're not going to run the Rafter J-G—forgive me for being tactless, but I heard Stubby Jordan's account of things—maybe you'd like to teach school, just for a term."

He told her about the ruffian who had frightened the horse and caused the runaway. He was honest enough to admit that a poor job of harnessing had converted rough humor into disaster. This recital shocked Eve. "Who was he? Oh, of course you'd not know, but describe him. That's an outrage! We don't countenance such things!"

"My spectacles were fogged, the light was against me, nothing is clear. Anyway, I'm not observing." He smiled a little, warmed by her sympathy. "Poring over books. Latin—Greek—Hebrew—very little use out here. He was a gigantic shape, so to speak, a bulk, a sound. I couldn't identify him. I was dumfounded."

"You must see the sheriff."

"I think I should first see the attorney handling my late uncle's estate. It was an error not to have seen him at once."

"Oh, Lem Boggs? I'm sorry, he's out of town for a few weeks."

Gilman's face lengthened. He fumbled in his pockets, made a helpless gesture. "I can't even guarantee a collect telegram."

"You go to Lim Ah Hing's laundry. He rented the premises from your uncle, and your uncle never collected, except when he needed immediate cash."

"A reserve, as it were?"

"Ace in the hole, we'd call it, out here."

"Ah. . . it'd hardly look right, presenting myself before a Chinese person, while in this plight. The Chinese are peculiar in their attitude toward those who have lost face. Stubby Jordan told me of a place where Uncle Joash maintained order. I should deal with our own kind of people."

"Maintained order?" Eve frowned perplexedly.

"Yes, at Smooth Bore Kate's. Odd name, where is Miss Kate's establishment?"

Eve made a choking sound, and reddened a little. "Dr. Gilman, one does hear, one can't help but hear of such resorts. Doctors of divinity simply do not fit in such a place."

He gulped and stuttered. "I didn't realize—ah—um—I might have known—my uncle was such a—um—where is Lim Ah Hing's laundry?"

She walked with him until he could see the faded red and blue sign. "Thank you, Miss Stirling. I am grateful. Perhaps—if the trustees approve of me—"

"I'd be grateful. Good day, Dr. Gilman."

HIS DAY was bright, until he remembered that her gratitude was because he'd given her hope of hastening her marriage with one Watson Barstow. Then he felt lonesome and abandoned as he had during that frightful night in the sagebrush, where snakes had slithered, and coyotes had howled, and cheeping loathsome little bats had

tangled their claws and wing points in his hair. He hoped Watson Barstow deserved such a lovely and refined woman. Probably a tobacco-chewing, whiskey-swilling, roaring ruffian built like a bull. . . .

He stepped into the laundry, which had a queer smell of soap and scorching cloth and kerosene and peanut oil and, Gilman suspected, of opium and ginger and other Chinese delicacies.

Lim Ah Hing looked up from his ironing, showing all his yellow teeth in a smile. He was a wrinkled little fellow, with merry eyes, and small, delicate hands. He wore a blue skullcap, and a pig-tail neatly knotted at the back of his head.

"Velly nice day, catchee-washee?"

"I am Horace Wilbur Gilman. My uncle, Joash Gilman, left me this property. The rent's—"

"You come back plitty soon. My catchee."

Ah Hing turned to his work. The Chinese, too polite to ask for identification, had his doubts.

"See here, Mr. Lim. I am actually Joash Gilman's nephew. I have lost my papers. Everything. I need the unpaid rent."

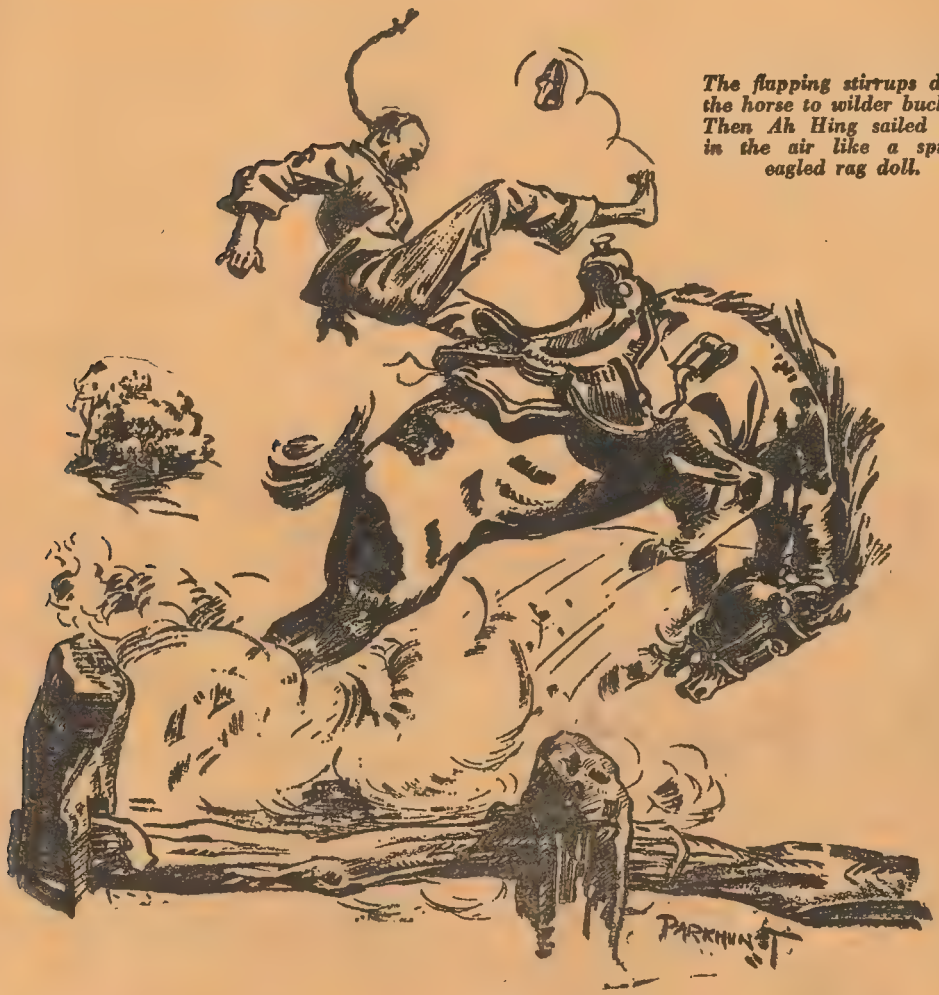
"Hoss lun-ee away?"

"Yes."

Ah Hing clasped his hands together, bobbed his head.

"Maybeso tomollow, catchee pay."

"But I have to eat. I have no place to stay. My uncle—"



The flapping stirrups drove the horse to wilder bucking. Then Ah Hing sailed high in the air like a spread-eagled rag doll.

"Velly nice man, Missy Gilman, velly nice."

Lots of compliments, but no cash. He was very glad indeed that he had baulked at being a missionary to the stubborn Chinese. But rather than approach Smooth Bore Kate, he'd starve. So he repeated.

"Look at my watch—see—my name—Gilman."

Ah Hing looked, with polite attention, at the engraving: *"To Horace Wilbur Gilman, from Uncle Joash."*

Ah Hing went politely stupid. "My no savvee lead-ee Melican. Velly plitty clockee." He held the twenty-one jewel watch to his ear. "Lunnee nice, no makee noise. You comee back, cleanee up, catchee glub."

He parted a blue curtain, and indicated a chair. He got a wooden tub, a bucket of water, a bar of soap. "My washee shirtee, velly quick, you waitee."

Gilman seated himself, and fumbled with his shoe laces. "Lend me some money on my watch. Later, I shall prove that I am Joash Gilman's nephew. You understand?"

"You eatee, you sleepee. Catchee money maybeso tomollow, him digee up in glound."

The heathen kept his money buried, did he? And he wasn't letting anyone see where. Gilman sensed that the

watch had identified him, and that Ah Hing was playing ignorant merely to study the matter. "Take the watch now, get me money later," he said.

"All light," Ah Hing agreed. "Eatee glub, sleepee."

Gilman, after eating a plate of ham and eggs from the restaurant next door, cleaned up and then stretched out on the Chinaman's bunk.

IT WAS DARK in the back room when voices awakened him. A lantern in front sent a murky yellow beam through the parting of the curtains. A chill of terror brought Gilman to his feet. He recognized the voice of the man who was bellowing at Ah Hing.

The gigantic ruffian had hunted him down to finish the previous day's violence; and Ah Hing was protecting Uncle Joash's nephew. So it sounded to Gilman, who was befuddled with fatigue. He couldn't run, he didn't know where the back door was. He groped, wildly, with growing panic, but his shoes were missing, and those pants were somewhere in the odorous gloom.

The Chinaman was jabbering, now angrily, shrilly. The big man snarled, roared. His language shocked Gilman.

"Why, you slant eyed son, I told you—"

He caught the Chinaman by the collar, easily lifted him from his feet with one hand, and began to cuff him with the other. Gilman was sure that the frail heathen was being killed for defending a guest.

Dead or crippled, Ah Hing couldn't dig up money. It was all a muddle of terror, dismay, indignation; and these grew into fury. But this time, Gilman's fury had an object. The hand groping for pants had found a flatiron.

Gilman wasn't sure whether it was he, or someone else, who went to the front, and screeched, "Cease at once, you uncouth brute!" And smacked down with the flatiron.

Being very close, his aim was good.

The man toppled. His fall shook the laundry.

Ah Hing, smiling blandly, crawled clear of his assailant. Then Gilman was sick and horrified. He looked at the spreading blood. "Oh, good heaven, what have I done! What have I done!"

Ah Hing darted to the back, and came out with a fearfully long, keen butcher knife. "Now fixee good," he chirped.

That smiling face, and the murderous eyes made Gilman recoil. "No, no, it's bad enough already. You can't, you mustn't."

"Confucious say, hittee snake, no killee, snake turnee lound, bite-ee."

"What—what have I done?"

"No doee good job. No killee, have got lunnee like hell. Him no good. You come—" He began to dig in the dirt-floored back room. "Catchee pants, catchee shoe, my go-ee with."

In a few minutes, Doctor of Divinity and heathen Chinee were heading for the railroad tracks. Ah Hing said, "My savvey hand-car, my workee on lail-load fi-ften year."

So they stole a section gang's hand car, and started pumping their way northward. Ah Hing said, "We goee War Paint Gulch, plenty Chinese fiend, police no find. My velly sick, too muchee. Dlipping Spling, no good."

"That," Gilman wheezed, "is a greater truth than Socrates or Aristotle ever spoke."

CHAPTER III

Haven

SEMAPHORE signals, red and green, flashed by in a blur as Gilman pumped his way toward War Paint Gulch, and refuge with Ah Hing's tong brothers. His lungs threatened to burst. Red spots danced before his eyes. Knives jabbed between his ribs, and his heart was on the verge of exploding. But the fragile Chinaman bobbed up and down.

Clack-clack, clackety-clack—

A locomotive whistle wooooo-wooooed. A headlight beam cut athwart the track. A train was racing down the main line, to swing into the spur which connected Dripping Springs and War Paint Gulch.

"Stoppee, stoppee!" the Chinaman screeched; and whether the the accursed vehicle had brakes or whether bucking the up and down motion of the handles did the job, Gilman couldn't decide. "Jumpee! Jumpee!"

Ah Hing set the example. Gilman followed. He rolled down the embankment. Then came a screaming of brakes, the hiss of air, and the crash of metal. Ah Hing caught Gilman's arm, helped him up, and said, "Lunnee like hell! Tlain man killee!"

Gilman floundered until he collapsed in a clump of mesquite. The train had halted. Lanterns bobbed about, A red flare blazed. A pistol roared, three times. Ah Hing chirped, "Him thinkee tlain hold-up, shootee too much at nothing."

Already, the telegraph wires must have been tapped, to send word in all direction that there'd been an attempt to wreck the train. Strangers along the track would be jailed on suspicion. Then Gilman missed his glasses.

"My goodness!" he groaned. "I lost them when I jumped. They'll find the frame and one lens, they'll know it was I."

Ah Hing reached into his quilted jacket and brought out a butcher knife, a monstrous pistol, and a poke of gold. "Me all-light, you all-light, we walkee now."

"But where?" Gilman demanded, as they tramped across the waste. "Where?"

"Way flom ail-load, any place velly nice."

The moon was rising. Gigantic cacti raised menacing arms. The warped and twisted Joshua trees seemed giants ready to reach and grab. Coyotes howled mockingly. An owl's wings brushed Gilman's face and left him just short of heart failure.

"Very nice, indeed!" he gasped. "We'll die in this waste."

"Man not live hundred year, man worry plenty for thousand year. Takee long time die."

After three hours of tramping, Gilman had his doubts about that last. The bitter wind cut through sweat drenched coat. Pneumonia dogged his heels. He finally quavered, "Maybe we could go back and pay for the handcar. Pay a fine for striking that man."

Ah Hing misunderstood. He countered, "Velly fine killee Misty Bastow, alla same too late now, him killee you, killee me too quickee."

"Good heaven! *Watson Barstow?*"

"Thass light. Too late killee now, him catchee too quick."

And now Gilman knew that perishing in the desert would be better than returning. It had all become clear: Barstow had run him off his ranch to force him to teach school, so that Eve Stirling would be free of her contract. Eve was going to marry that monster. She couldn't know what a fiend the man was. She'd not believe if she were told. . .

At last Gilman stumbled, and could not get up. He scarcely realized that he had fallen. When he awakened, he had Ah Hing's jacket wrapped about him, yet he shivered, his teeth chattered, and his hands were slate blue. The Chinaman was crouching beside a tiny fire over which he roasted meat. He offered Gilman several pieces.

Quail rose with drumming wings.

"I didn't hear you shoot any," Gilman said, as he ate his portion, and found it good.

Ah Hing's jabber and smile were equally beyond understanding.

THE DAYS that followed were a nightmare. The Chinaman got water by tapping cactus trunks. Gilman Gilman became mortally sick when he learned he'd been eating barbecued rattlesnake, and not quail. Ah Hing smiled, ate the next two meals himself. Gilman at last became too hungry to have qualms. . .

To his surprise, he didn't catch pneumonia.

At last, far off, he saw cottonwood trees. Gilman was amazed at being able to distinguish them without glasses. And as they crawled up over the lip of an arroyo, he saw a fence.

"Thank heaven!" he exclaimed devoutly, "civilization at last."

But the barbed wire took the edge from his gratitude. Ah Hing tried to spread the tightly stretched strands. Gilman's hands were slashed, and his pants were ripped. A hatful of rock and sand kicked up into his face. *Weeeeeee—whack!*

Another bullet, and closer. "Help! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Gilman croaked, as he fought the wire.

Ah Hing straightened up, and raised his hands.

"No shootee! No shootee!"

A rider came rom the cottonwoods, Winchester at the ready. "Hold it, you skunks, or I'll let daylight through you."

The apparition was a woman. Though the voice was not high-pitched, it was undeniably as feminine as the figure. She wore a denim blouse, levis, and battered-looking boots. The horse was a scrawny critter. Rawhide tongs and bits of wire pieced out the bridle. The saddle, though serviceable, had seen better days.

"Madam," Gilman began, "I implore—"

"Don't you call me madam, or I'll bust your head in! What are you doing to that fence? You there, who're you?"

"Me Lim Ah Hing, Clistian Chinaman, velly hungly." Then, pointing, "Him, Missy Holass Wibble Gilman, velly nice Clistian pleachee-man, talkee Bible."

The girl was puzzled. It was clear that this was not what she had expected. "Well, get out of that fence, give him a hand."

She was in her early twenties, but so determined of expression, and weathered, that she looked older; her gray-green eyes were narrowed from sun squint and weariness, and her forehead was lined for the same reason. Gilman, clear of the wire, stared in amazement.

"Well! See anything you never saw before?"

"Er. . . I beg your pardon, ah . . . . Miss—"

She smiled a little, and looked much more attractive. "Cora Nagel. Lucky I had the sun in my eyes, or I'd got you the first time."

"I am aware we're trespassing—still—we're lost—"

"No catchee glub fo-fi' day."

"Except rattlesnakes and roasted cactus," Gilman added. "We are—" He looked uneasily over his shoulder. "Strangers."

"You look strange," Cora admitted. "I thought you were one of those polecats that've been cutting our wire. We've had trouble, we're short handed. The Chink—"

"My name Ah Hing, Clistian Chinaman."

"Ah Hing says you're a pulpit pounder, Mr. Gilman."

He straightened his tattered black "That is not entirely accurate, Miss Nagel. I am a divinity student, but I have never been ordained, I never felt it to be my calling. The truth is—" Another uneasy glance behind him. "I came west to take charge of my legacy. But there are a number of things about animal husbandry which puzzle me."

Cora laughed, amiably. "It's really simple. Root, hog, or die. So now you're on the dodge? Fast work, for a pilgrim."

"On the dodge?"

"I can't believe you killed anyone, but you look as if you had a posse on your trail. No, don't tell me, I don't want to know, get some grub under your belt before you travel."

She wheeled the pinto, and beckoned. They trailed after her for perhaps a quarter of a mile when two riders came racing up.

"What in tunket is the shooting about?" the bearded man bawled. "Whyn' you keep them jaspers in front of you?"

"Oh, lord, pa! They're not Diamond K men, it's a Chinaman and a parson on the dodge."

The foremost rider looked as though he had been rough hewn out of oak. Old man Nagel, like his daughter, had a harassed and purposeful expression. So

did the ragged cowpuncher, who was so thin he hardly cast a shadow. Both had Winchesters out of the scabbards.

Gilman pulled trigger on the heavy gun and Cora shot the Colt at the oncoming enemy.

Nagel heard Gilman's story, looked him over, and Ah Hing also. "Washee-washee, huh? Can you cook?"

"My cookee good glub, choppee wood, doee good."

"I must warn you," Gilman began.

"I'm warning you," Nagel cut in. "We're hag-ridden by the damndest dirtiest sons in the hull state, we're short-handed, we're so busy putting up wire we ain't got time to tend our critters. If'n you and Ah Hing can do chores, whilst us'ns tend to the real business, you can stay till the sheriff ketches up."

"I assure you loyalty and industry, Mr. Nagel—"

"Long as you earn your keep, I ain't worrying, I don't think they'd be hard put enough to try to get you to sell me out. Preachers are all right as long as they can do a day's work when they ain't pounding a pulpit."

Gilman nodded and Ah Hing nodded and they went along—to learn some of the less-pleasant aspects of the business.

CHAPTER IV

Barslow Again

GILMAN grubbed mesquite roots for the kitchen stove, and gathered cow chips. Finally, he went to repair fences. And from watching Slim and the others snake mired cows from mud at the edge of a waterhole, and doctor calves for screw-worms, Gilman began to realize that the cattle business was somewhat more than just letting the critters increase and multiply.

The third evening, the cowpunchers gathered at the corral to watch Ah Hing ride one of the livelier horses. Two held the nag, and two hoisted him to the saddle.

"Lettee go!"

In a moment, Ah Hing was pulling leather. His pigtail trailed after him, his skullcap rolled in the dust. His head bobbed as if his neck were made of wet rawhide.

"Whip 'im and scratch 'im!" they howled.

Gilman cried, "Stop the horse before he's hurt. He'll be killed."

"Hell, preacher, that Chinee can't hurt a hoss."

Gilman watched with horrified fascination. He thought that Ah Hing's head would snap off. The stirrups were flapping, driving the horse to wilder bucking, until Ah Hing sailed high in the air, spread-eagled, like a rag doll.

Gilman closed his eyes. He did not open them until he heard a bone-shaking thump. The Chinaman lay there for a moment, motionless. He crawled to his hands and knees. His nose was bleeding, and so was his mouth. But he was grinning, as he limped toward the rail, one hand extended.

He gave Slim a dollor. "Next timee, bettee two dolla, lide hossee."

The cowpunchers eyed Gilman. "When you trying it, preacher?"

Gilman, horrified by the suggestion, blinked and gulped. Slim said, "Aw, let the pilgrim alone, he can pound a pulpit better'n you."

Ah Hing piped up, "Missee Gilman, he tly, my showee first, makee bet, him doee now."

They turned on Gilman. "All right, preacher, you can't let a Chinee dare a white man."

He didn't try to resist. As they hoisted him to the saddle, he knew precisely how a condemned man feels on ascending the gallows. Advice dinned in his ears. The horse pawed and snorted. It'd been bad enough back on his own range, with a sleepy nag, but this hammer-headed pinto fiend was eager for another triumph.

"Let 'im buck!" they howled, and then, "Ride 'im straight up!"

The horse took off with a tremendous bound. Gilman gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, reached for the horn.

"Set up straight, you goggled-eyed son—!"

There was other advice, in language even more frightful. He sat up, and somehow stayed in the saddle. As bucking went, it was little more than crow-hopping. Another arching of the back, another stiff-legged descent. He thought that his spine was telescoped. He lost a stirrup. He swayed, but saved himself. The men howled, "You're going good, preacher! Fan 'im with your hat!"

Three more jumps, and the horse settled down in earnest. The explosion was so sudden that Gilman had no chance to tighten up. The first thing he knew, he was rolling, clawing the earth, and watching heels kick up.

HE GOT UP, dizzy but unhurt. The ground felt odd under his feet. He began to realize that the human body was not quite as fragile as his mother have given him to believe. Better yet, he'd lasted a few seconds longer than Ah Hing.

"Purty good, preacher. If'n you'd put up money, you'd be collecting."

"Thank you, I never gamble."

There was a sour chuckle. "That's what this here Chinee told us, don't you dast take lessons from him."

That night, Gilman asked Ah Hing, "Why did you do such an insane thing?

You know nothing about riding, even less than I."

"Go-ee new countly, talkee new talk."

The following afternoon, Gilman was busy lashing rails to the fence which surrounded a big stack of hoe-cut hay. One of the reasons that the Nagels were having such trouble with their barbed wire was that their spread not only included several good-sized pools, but also, a considerable stretch of gramma grass: and their neighbors, the Kirbys considered that monopolizing these valuables was unfair competition, despite the fact that the Nagels had a clear title to the land. Cow critters, Gilman was amazed to learn, couldn't always survive by grazing, and in bad years, they were reduced to eating mesquite beans, and cactus with the spines burned off.

He was also learning the uses of rawhide. The Nagels had spent so much for barbed wire that they couldn't afford nails for any inside work . .

"Uncle Joash," he reflected, as he pulled up on another thong of wet rawhide, "undoubtedly showed great perspicuity in concentrating on his legal practice. Opinions would be far easier to deliver than beef, and—"

His philosophical conversation with himself was interrupted by a piercing screech. Ah Hing, skillet in one hand, knife in the other, came racing from the cook shack, his pigtail streaming after him like a comet's tail.

"Dammee, Bastowe catchee, Bastowe kilee!" he repeated as Gilman jerked about, to face him. "You takee, shootee!"

He dropped the skillet, and whipped out his monstrous cap and ball pistol. Gilman recoiled from the fearsome weapon.

"Barstow? Watson Barstow?" he echoed. "Where—which way—how can—?"

Ah Hing pointed and jabbered. A rider, a big man on a big horse was approaching the ranch house. Two cowpunchers followed him. None had spied the fugitives. Gilman skirted the haypile to put it between him and the approaching menace.

Old man Nagel, hearing the commotion, came out of the granary. "What the hell's up! he grumbled.

"Watson Barstow—he is coming to kill me—he is seeking revenge—I tried to tell you—you wouldn't listen—"

"Huh. Barstow? Circle W-B?" Nagel's gnarled face knotted in a scowl. "All right, duck for cover, I'll talk to him."

Where—but where?"

"In the hay, you dumb galoot."

Ah Hing was already burrowing into the heap. Gilman dug in after him, and wormed about, so he could watch.

The three riders pulled up.

Nagel had gone a dozen paces to meet them. "Howdy!" Then, as the newcomers made no move to discount, he asked, "You gents growed to your saddles?"

Barstow grinned. "We're looking for someone."

"Ain't no one lost here."

Barstow ignored the snub. "I'm looking for bone-rack of a dude, and a Chinaman."

"Don't see 'em anywheres, do you?"

BARSTOW dismounted, after wheeling his horse so that it was between him and Nagel; the men with him fanned out and dismounted. "Hell, we're just inquiring, don't act so hostile."

Nagel spat. "I ain't been getting along with the Kirbys."

"We're no friends of the Kirbys. We trailed the dude and the Chink from the railroad to your fence, it looked a lot like they'd gone through, I been wondering if you seen 'em."

"Nary hide nor hair."

"Mind if we look around?"

"You ain't laws. Don't forget to close the gate."

"Nagel, we've got business with the dude, it's important. Nothing to harm him." He smiled amiably. "No harm at all. It's for his own good."

"OK, if you're sech good friends of his'n, you ain't going to mind looking further."

"We circled your whole spread," Barstow said, "and we didn't pick up the leaving trail. They're on your range."

Gilman, burrowed in the hay, broke

into a sweat. The three riders were armed. Nagel was not. Ah Hing whispered, "No shootee now, bossee man in way."

Nagel answered Barstow: "You being too blind to cut sign don't give you no call to poke around here. Nothing here that don't belong here, understand?"

And then the hay made Gilman sneeze.

Barstow smiled sourly. "You been lying to us. Joe, Shorty, look in that hay stack! Don't do anything foolish, Nagel."

He drew a gun.

Nagel's hands rose.

Ah Hing reached for the pistol, and caught Gilman's shoulder, to hold him back. "No go-ee out, my shootee—"

He cocked the pistol, and squirmed about to get in line.

Then a window slammed open. Cora said, "Both barrels are loaded, for two cents I'd pour it into you right now!"

She had a shotgun leveled.

Joe and Shorty rocked back on their heels.

"Put up that gun!"

Then, as Barstow obeyed, Cora said, "Pa, you ought to know better than to run around without being heeled."

"We were just looking," Barstow protested.

"I heard all about it. Get your gun, pa, they'll look like a collander if I cut loose."

It didn't take old man Nagel long to get his Colt. It took Watson Barstow even less time to mount up and make tracks.

Gilman, crawling out of the haypile, was red and stuttering. "I—I am sorry—we shall leave at once—this is quite unbearable—we owe you enough already—"

"Oh, shut up!" Cora cried. "You poor excuse of a man, you're no good even for a scarecrow! Get busy on that fence before I run you off the place!"

That night, Gilman went to the cook shack, and awakened Ah Hing, He said, "We are making trouble for these good people. Barstow will be back. He will be back. He will bring officers with him. You were quite right in saying, *when you strike a snake, kill it, or the snake will turn and bite you. . .*"

"Ah. . . you talkee Confucius talk, velly smart now. All-light, goee Wa-Pain Gutch, got plenty Clistian Chinee fliend."

CHAPTER V

Custom of the Country

GILMAN and Ah Hing made for the cottonwoods, seeking cover lest Nagel's fence riders spot and halt them. Actually, there was little chance of meeting any of Nagel's men, for there were too few for an effective patrol; but Gilman, though ashamed to stay, was equally ashamed to face any of those who had given him shelter.

"Tak-ee gun," Ah Hing said, as they reached the end of the cottonwood strip.

"I can't shoot, I can't even see well."

"Blind man see all-light in dark. My catchee knife."

The moon had not yet risen. They stopped from time to time to sniff the breeze for the odor of Durham cigarettes, or horses, for Nagel's men would shoot first and challenge later. Despite the gloom sensed that the growing tension made his eyes play tricks. Several times, he caught Ah Hing's shoulder and whispered a warning.

Finally the Chinaman said, "Walk-ee slow, eyes look-ee mo' better. One snake bitte-ee man, evely lope lookee like snake."

Gilman eased up, if only because translating Ah Hing's gibberish gave him something else to think of. "Relaxation," he told himself, "promotes keener vision. Hmmm. . . Confucius never said that, but it might be true. Muscular tension may affect the eye. Thereby upsetting Helmholz' theory. . ."

Finally they reached the fence. Somewhere ahead was a spot where a small wash made it easy to crawl under, instead of separating the tightly stretched strands. Spreading the wire would "telegraph" a vibration for quite a distance, perhaps alarming one of the riders.

They felt their way along until Gil-

man gasped. His ankles were entangled in loose wire. Ah Hing cursed in Cantonese. Someone had cut the strands. However, the gap extended for only one bay. Whoever had done the job had not dared to, hadn't bothered to rip off a quarter of a mile before having to shack a hock and outrace bullets.

This was something that even a pilgrim could reason out.

"There is a bell wire at the gate. The Kirbys know that, and so would Barstow. But since so little wire was torn down, it is clear that someone is mainly interested in gaining admittance."

"Lookee for us?"

"My goodness!" Gilman quavered. "Worse yet, they may plan an outrage at the farmhouse."

"Shootee up, burnee house?"

They hurried back. The raiders, if any, would be moving stealthily. Perhaps they'd paused to muffle the horses' hooves. He'd by now learned that no one in that outrageous land ever willingly walked more than fifty feet.

While the moon was not yet up, a faint glow outlined the distant peaks. From a considerable distance, the ranch buildings could be distinguished, so Gilman moved in a straight line.

"Smell hossee."

Ah Hing was right. They heard a man mutter. There were muted sounds, the voice of leather.

"Nagel man come back. No shoot-ee too quickee."

Gilman cocked the revolver. He held the weapon well before him. He was more than half afraid of it.

THERE was now a distinct odor of burning grass. The chilly wind whic brought the smell whipped a small flame to a tall golden tongue. Sparks geysered, leveled off, drifted against the shakes of the barn and farmhouse.

There were three riders silhoutted by the flare. They had just mounted up. Their carbine barrels reflected the light.

The burning haystack crackled and popped.

Three men.

Barstow jerked upright in the barber's chair and yelled: "What do you want?"

Something exploded in Gilman's brain. The three who had come hunting him had returned to smoke him out, perhaps to murder Nagel when he came running. It was as though someone else guided Gilman. He pointed the pistol. The nearest man loomed up big as a barn door. The weapon roared.

The man tumbled from the saddle. A horse snorted. The riderless one bolted. Two survivors wheeled. The glare they had faced made them unable to see what had taken them from the rear. Ah Hing was yelling, "Cockee trigger! Shootee more!"

But Gilman was already thumbing the hammer. Before it caught, his grip slipped, and another blast let go. At bullet whined. He dropped to the ground. He loosed another shot. Then a buffalo gun bellowed like thunder from the ranch house. A Winchester crackled from the bunk house.

A horse dropped kicking, flinging the rider against the watering trough. The third and only one in the saddle was

blazing away as he raced into darkness.

Nagel, buffalo gun in hand, hitched up one gallus. Cora followed him. Her red hair trailed, and the wind played tricks with her nightgown. She had a shotgun. Line riders came pounding into view, yelling as they rode.

"Grab buckets," Nagel bawled, "soak down the roof!"

There wasn't a chance of saving the haystack, but after a heartbreaking hour, the buildings were out of danger. Meanwhile, the cowhands had bound the man flung against the horse trough.

When he came down from the bunkhouse roof, Gilman was scorched, smoke-blinded, and giddy. Cora was dishing out coffee.

Gilman blurted, " I thought it was Barstow coming back." He pointed to the one they'd bound. "But that man's a stranger. And so is that one."

Nagel grinned. "That's why you done such a nice job of drilling him."

"I? Drill—ah—shoot him? Good heaven, I--I—merely fired—to give the alarm. I am no marksman."

"Aw right, it was an accident, but you got him right where his suspenders crossed. Warn't no one else."

"I—killed—a—man"

"Warn't no one else, preacher."

"Velly nice shootee, Missy Gilman."

"Oh, let him alone!" Cora cut in. "Sit down and have some coffee, Horace." She eyed him speculatively. "I declare, you beat everything. How on earth did you ever smell a rat and get the drop on those devils?"

"I—I was confused—I didn't know what to do—I could have saved the hay stack if I'd fired in time."

"Pa, he's crying because he could have saved the haystack."

BUT old man Nagel was gone. So was the prisoner. So were three cowhands. The place was unnaturally quiet. The cowpunchers who remained drank their coffee, and after exchanging glances, they separated, each going in a different direction.

Cora sat on the steps with Gilman, ready to refill his cup. The wind blew her hair against his cheek. Aside from drawing a robe closer about her, she seemed not to notice the cold. Gilman fidgeted and blew the steam from his cup. Something was going to happen; he could sense it, but he couldn't guess what.

"Look, Horace," she finally said. "I was pretty rough with you today."

"I do not blame you. I have always been quite incompetent, and entirely useless for anything but poring over books. Ah Hing got me out of Dripping Springs. You saved me from Watson Barstow. I was leaving tonight. I was ashamed to face any of you. So—"

He told her about the cut wire.

"So that's it!" She drew a deep breath, closed her eyes. "Well, you can't ever tell."

She didn't look so tired and overdetermined nor so bitter; she seemed, suddenly to have something in common with lovely Eve Stirling. Except that she was looking at him in a way Eve never had.

"Where's everyone gone?"

A level glance. "You can't guess?"

"Ah. . . the customs of these parts—oh, of course, they've taken the culprit to jail, though that could have been postponed till tomorow. He could hardly have escaped."

Cora shivered, and grimaced a little. "There's a lone tree, quite a way from our fence. And they're not going out to chop fuel."

He began to understand. Cora refilled his cup. Then without a word, she went into the house. He wished he hadn't asked her that question.

From a great distance came a ragged volley.

There was no shouting, nor any pounding of hooves.

In the morning, there'd be a fence to repair. Buzzards would be descending to get the bullet-riddled bait that dangled from a tree. And as he went to the bunk house, Gilman found comfort in convincing himself he'd accidentally got his man.

CHAPTER VI

The Drive

THE cowpunchers quit laughing when Ah Hing and Gilman were bucked off, every evening at sunset, some ten seconds after the riding lesson started. And old man Nagel said, "Preacher, you can have this here Colt for a present, the Chink's cap-and-ball gun is outa date."

These things made sense to Gilman, though he protested, "Mr. Nagel, I am too near-sighted to shoot."

The old man snorted. "So's nearly everybody else, with a six gun, ain't one in a thousand can hit a barn at fifty yards, most gun fighting's done close up. If'n a fellow can't shoot accurate-like, all he's got to do is jest keep shooting, and keep going forward, it confuses hell outen the other feller, and sometimes you knock the son over."

"But—but—suppose one does meet a person who is accurate at long range?"

Nagel grinned. "It ain't no worse's dying of epizootic, or having a hoss fall on you, or being tromped in a stampede, or having a rustler dry-gulch you, or gitting bit by a snake, or starving to death, which last is what happens if'n you can't stand up for your rights."

One thing, however, did not make any sense to Gilman: and that was a Chinese trick. Ah Hing would sit out in the glaring light, whenever there was a breathing spell in the long round of chores. He'd pull a greasy pack of cards from his jacket, and cut the deck, demanding that Gilman call the suit and number of spots in a split second.

"Ah Hing, I am not interested in cards. They are Satan's picture gallery. I shall never gamble. I counsel you against the habit."

"My winnee alla timee," was the bland retort. "Watchee card, how many spot?"

"Six hearts."

Then came a two-card exercise: one half the deck against Ah Hing's chest, the other half held at arm's length. "Lookee light, lookee left, makee eye move quick like card moves."

So he humored the heathen, whose only explanation for the hocus pocus was, "Maybeso you go-ee back Dlipping Spling bimbye."

Gilman shuddered. He'd not dare face Watson Barstow, and facing Eve Stirling would be even worse. He could not bear the thought of such a refined lady marrying such an outrageous hound. Then, bitterly, "But since she is so warped as to prefer a handsome scoundrel to a man of character, I should forget her entirely!"

Only, he did not forget her, despite Cora Nagel's growing interest. Cora began prettying up, and the result surprised Gilman. The old man began eyeing his daughter, and turning a new, sharp scrutiny on the preacher.

"It's fixing to be a bad Winter," he muttered. "And them coyotes burning our feed, that ain't helped. We got to sell some critters, or else we'll be busy in the Spring, skinning the carcasses."

One morning, as Gilman toted water to the kitchen, Cora nudged the bench. "Sit down, Horace, there's some pie left over from supper."

The grub had been improving. So had Cora's hair, which was now fluffy and gleaming. The gingham house dresses, made up from goods that came by mail order, were bright and crisp. With a Chink and a pilgrim helping with the chores, she had a lot more time about the house. She'd quit doctoring calves for screw worms, or watching out for fence cutters. Thus far, the Kirbys hadn't made anything of the hanging of the captured raider.

GILMAN'S pulse stepped up as he took the chair. She still didn't look like Eve Stirling, but she'd shed some of that determined expression, which had unpleasantly reminded him of his mother, who had hounded him into studying theology.

"They all call me Preacher," he corrected. "Horace, according to Slim, is not a fit name for a man."

"I think it's nice and scholarly. Pa said he was quite sure you'd not have any more trouble with Watson Barstow."

Gilman fidgeted and looked uneasy. Cora didn't know that he was comparing her with a schoolmarm whose fascination hadn't been squelched by book-learning. So she went on, "Don't you see, he can't have the law on you, he'd become a laughing stock, admitting a pilgrim had laid him out with a flat iron, while he was slapping a Chinaman."

Gulman gulped a big bite of dried apple pie.

"But I'd never dare go back to my estate at Dripping Springs, he'd shoot me down like a dog. On some pretext."

Cora brightened, she glowed; she glowed; she hitched closer on the bench. "He's high-handed and rough-shod, he'll get his come-uppance from some of his neighbors. And by then, you'll know all about animal husbandry, and Stubby Jordan and the rest of your Uncle Joash's men will have confidence in you."

Her speech had changed. It was far from bookish, it was still cow country talk, but she used words borrowed from him. This frightened and flattered Gilman. He didn't know what to say, and when he did say it, he groped.

"Ah—very logical—you've been so kind and thoughful—I am truly grateful—you harbored me when—"

She thrust the pie pan out of his hand. It clattered to the floor, but the tinny sound didn't startle Gilman; there was too much else to do that. "You idiot—" Cora was kissing him, and she meant business. "Gratitude! You—"

Gilman got hold of himself, and of Cora also. For a moment it was awkward as amateur dramatics, and then he began to realize that two could play at it. As his arms closed in earnest, she gasped, "Oh—Horace—you're hurting me."

Stretching wire, grubbing mesquite roots, and all the other chores had filled him out. He couldn't quite believe it, but the lady was telling him he didn't know his own strength. . .

Then a bull voice bawled from the corral, "You, preacher, what the smoking hell! Quit that lallygagging, we got chores to do."

Gilman fairly fell through the kitchen door, and narrowly missed running smack into the watering trough. His ears burned.

"Wipe the pie crust offen your chin," old man Nagel told him. "If you gotta eat betwixt meals, stuff some jerky in your pocket and chaw that, pastry ain't good for the liver."

SOME DAYS LATER, during which time Cora's logic and her pies had become more and more palatable, Gilman and the others got old man Nagel's orders: "Round up four-five hundred critters, that there gold strike to War Paint Gulch has got things a-booming, and instead of a beating, we take a profit on the burned up haystack."

Gilman wasn't any good on the range, though by now he could ride without being piled, providing the nag wasn't spooky. One thing he could do was watch the *remuda*, for, no longer being mortally afraid of horses, his presence didn't rile them, and he was seldom kicked or bitten. Ah Hing, standing in the chuck wagon door, reminded him, "Alla time lookee at bland, keepee eye busy alla timee, lookee close, lookee way off, all samee lookee at card."

And to his amazement, Gilman found that his eyes were becoming stronger. He could now read a brand at a distance which, on his coming to the Nagels, would have been too great for him to distinguish a horse from a steer. A Chinaman making a fool of Helmholz' theory on eye corrections: quite incredible, yet the proof was with him.

"I was quite right," he told himself, "about never desiring to become a missionary. Now I begin to consider, as a working hypothesis, that the Chinese should send missionaries to teach us a few things. . ."

Finally the critters were rounded up

Barstow blazed away, one-two. The slugs spattered against the dobe, barely missing Gilman.

for the drive. Some of the Lazy-N cowpokes were of course to remain and watch the fences. But Cora said, "Pa, I'm goin' along."

"You're crazy! It ain't fitten for a woman."

"Grandma came out here in a wagon and it was a sight rougher."

"There was other women folks along."

"You're going with the drive, aren't you?"

"I ain't women folks," he grumbled, and bit off a chew.

"It wouldn't be fitting, leaving me alone here, would it?"

Old man Nagel gave her a sharp look, and stroked his tobacco-stained mustaches. "You ain't never been afeard of our cowhands afore. If'n you're afeard the preacher is going to fall in love with a honkytonk gal, you might as well come along, I'd ruther put up with you than think of the jawing I'd get when I get back."

"I'll run the chuck wagon," she promised, "I'll bake dried peach pies. Ah Hing can ride and help with the critters."

"Huh! Chinee cowpuncher. He sets a hoss like a scarecrow on a merry-go-round."

"He doesn't fall off, does he?"

That settled old man Nagel. And later that day, Cora cornered Gilman. "Horace, darling," she cooed, "won't it be romantic, I'm going along on the drive."

Horace said it would be romantic, but he was also worried. His mother and Aunt Asenath would scream like bald eagles if they knew. . . thank goodness, they wouldn't know. . . .

But *he* would know.

CHAPTER VII

The Battle

FOR the first two days, old man Nagel pushed the trail herd as hard as he could; the quicker he got away from the Kirbys, the better, for he was not any too reassured by there having been no reprisals for his reception of the hay burning trio. And then, within two days of his goal, as the herd headed for rolling hills, trouble came from strangers, and toward evening.

The steers were spooky and restless from thirty-six hours without water.

Two men came riding up. The spokesman, a hatchet-faced cuss with a mean eye and a sneering mouth, lost no time coming to the point.

"We're Box-D reps, my name's Seton, we're looking for strays," he said to old man Nagel.

Gilman, riding in the chuck wagon with Cora, heard and saw from close range. Ah Hing was driving the wagon.

"We got no strays, ain't had a chanct, we haven't strung out, we hustled 'em along close, and watched 'em clost, and what in tunket'd be a-straying in this here *malpais?*"

"We got a right to cut herds, Box-D owns range right clost to this here stretch."

"Fer raising coyotes and horn toads. Mebbe you got a right, but it ain't reasonable," Nagel objected. "My critters are thirsty, they ain't grazed enough to wad a shotgun, and fooling around cutting'd make it worse, they're liable to stampede."

Seton wasn't a bit worried. His leer became nastier.

"Rights is rights. I seen a couple critters that look like our'n."

"Get 'em at War Paint Gulch."

Several of Nagel's riders came up. When they heard what was going on, they began to mutter. Seton missed nothing. "It's you-all agin us two, but it ain't getting you nowhere—" He gestured toward the narrow draw. "Behind the crest, I got more men, and if'n there's a ruckus, they'll come a shooting. And this ain't good ground fer a stompede. You jiggers that fence in all the time, you can't expect us that don't fence to be plumb obliging."

"This ain't your range."

"It's close to it."

Nagel turned to his men. They were worried now, as well as wrathful. They glanced meaningly at the chuck wagon, and shook their heads. Better run the risk of getting a lot of critters scattered all over hell's half acre than have a general melee. That would start the whole herd running.

Cora thrust her head from the wagon. "Pa, these skunks are honing for trouble, I'll get out, the preacher'll ride with me. If you got any critters of his, let him have 'em, but don't stand for any cutting into the middle of the herd, just guesswork."

She had it clearly summed up: while cutting a herd was legal and proper, it was all too often a pretext for delaying it, for pretending that a strange brand had been spotted in the center; repeated cutting could end in pure disaster.

Gilman muttered, "I feel like a deserter leaving now."

"Oh, shucks, Horace, it's my fault, tagging along. Get me out of here, and pa'll tell them off."

Gilman glanced about the wagon, then grabbed the prodigous gun lashed to the bows. Despite its short barrel, it was the heaviest weapon he'd ever hefted.

"Horace, you don't want that; take the Winchester from the boot, up front by Ah Hing."

"Pardon me, but I prefer this one."

"Oh, all right! And you'd never think of cartridges," she snapped, as she dug behind some dunnage to get a box.

Outside, the wrangle continued. Voices rose.

SETON chuckled as he saw Gilman clumsily mount up. "More gun than man leaving, you sure ain't losing any fighting strength, Nagel. Quit horsing around and come across peaceable like."

Gilman didn't make out Nagel's wrathful answer, but he got Seton's next quip:

"Ain't any sense you sending riders out thataway to flank my men, they ain't new born kittens, they got eyes wide open."

Then Nagel came in loud and strong: "You with your men behind the ridge! I can see through that, a surprise party to stompede us whilst we're busy cutting, you sidewinder."

And that was all Gilman caught before he was out of earshot, riding to the right of the draw. Looking to his left, he saw some of Nagel's men fanning out.

"Do you believe they plan such contemptible strategy?"

"They don't have to plan it! They were born that way!"

"Why not ride directly for the gap?"

"Because we might be mowed down before they saw I wasn't a man. Darling, you've got so much to learn!" Then, brightly, "I'm so glad I came, or you'd be in this mess."

"I despise myself for leaving Ah Hing," he answered, somberly. "Yet I could not let you go alone. I am on the horns of a dilemma."

"That any worse than sitting on a *cholla?*"

They were near the crest, when Gilman dismounted. "They might have . . . ah. . . quick trigger fingers, I must look."

He took the gun with him. Cora followed as he crawled through the brush. Then, behind them, hooves pounded. Men yelled. Pistols popped, and a Winchester whacked. Cora looked over her shoulder. "Seton's high-ttailing, Slim and Rawhide and Soapy're larruping after Seton and his man, Pa's waving them to come back, he daren't leave—"

Gilman wasn't wasting time pitting his vision against Cora's; he knew he couldn't see that far. Moreover, there was plenty for him to see just ahead. His exclamation made Cora whip about.

A dozen riders came boiling up the pass. They had Winchesters out. It was clear that they'd been waiting for a signal, and that they were responding. Now that Nagel's outriders, despite warning, had been tricked into trying to head Seton off, the herd was as good as unprotected.

"Oh, good Lord!" Cora cried, and snatched Gilman's revolver. "Those dirty tramps!"

He couldn't stop her. She had the Colt, she was levelling it across a rock to steady it for a long shot. His mouth was too dry to protest. Then he revolted. If the enemy swerved and rode him down—

He leveled the heavy gun, and pulled the trigger. There was a blast as of a cannon. The concussion stunned him. He thought that his shoulder had been torn from his body. The breech had reared up to slap his cheek. It was as though a giant's fist had punched him.

A gust of smoke billowed. Through it, he saw what he couldn't believe. He didn't even hear Cora's revolver whack. After the thunder he had cut loose, a .45 sounded like a firecracker.

A horse had been bowled off its feet. It didn't limp, it didn't break stride, it didn't act as a wounded horse; the creature was knocked over.

Cora screamed, "Pull the lever! Lever it!"

He levered. She shoved a cartridge into the breech, lest he fumble. He fired again. Another horse went down. The one following piled into it.

THE ENEMY dismounted on the run. They had taken no time to pull up. Cora's .45 whacked. A man staggered. Gilman dipped into the box of cartridges as she rasped, "Keep it going, or we're goners!"

"I can't see the men now—"

"Get the horses! Keep 'em afoot!"

One — twice — three times thunder rumbled from the crest. The third animal escaped. The others bolted. Gilman, for all his improved vision, couldn't hit a horse unless it was a big one, and not too far off.

"I can't get any more horses," he

(Continued on page 80)

THE REDWILLOW

THE RAIN was pelting steadily into their faces as they wheeled into the end of Pawnee City's single wide street, which was now a slippery river of mud, and Kirby Angus swung his arm overhead in a follow-the-leader signal to the two Tall Hat riders following him.

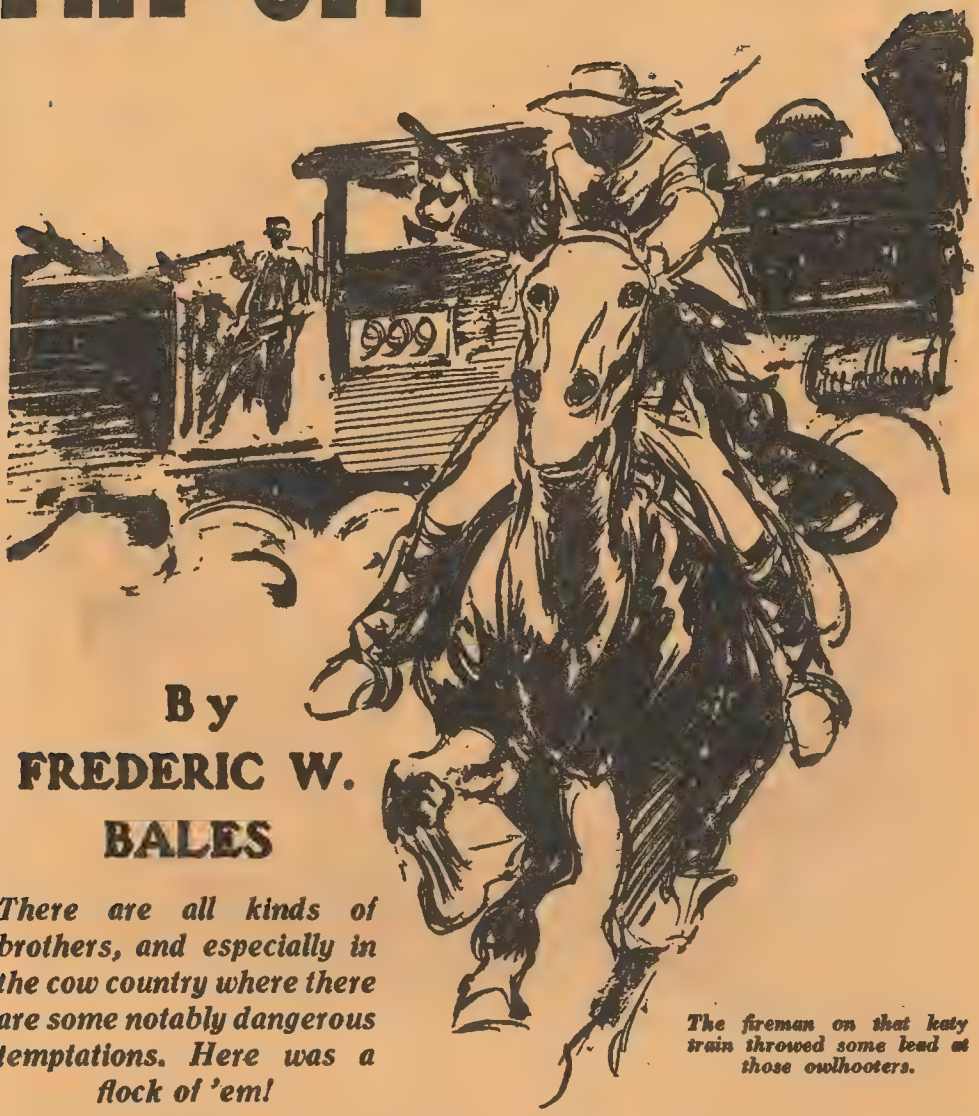
Ahead, Kirby's brother, Kirk, spearheading their approach into town for the Saturday night's holiday, lifted his chestnut mare in a bouncing charge through the puddles with an exultant laugh. He had the appearance of a gigantic, night-hawking bat, Kirby mused, as he pounded into the spray behind Kirk's chestnut.

They swung into a tie-rail in front of the Antlers Saloon, and Kirby watched Kirk give his reins a quick hitch and elbow his way boisterously down the crowded walk toward the cluster of small houses at the foot of the street.

Storm Shalott would be waiting there at one of the lamp-lighted windows. It was Kirk—he who had courted and teased many women—who could arouse that shy, appealing look in Storm's eyes.

It was Kirby, tongue-tied in Storm's

PAY-OFF



The fireman on that katy train throwed some lead at those owlhooters.

By
FREDERIC W. BALES

There are all kinds of brothers, and especially in the cow country where there are some notably dangerous temptations. Here was a flock of 'em!

presence and alternately bedeviled by his loyalty to his brother and his unspoken love for the girl, who stood now and kicked viciously at an unoffending hitch-post.

The wrenching pain which shot up his foot brought his thoughts back to Pawnee City's rain-dampened realities.

A hand fell on his shoulder; it was the heavy touch of Mac Greener, a grizzled cowhand who had ridden for Tall Hat since Kirby and Kirk had bought the bankrupt ranch and rebuilt it into one of the best grazelands on the Dead Elk Creek range.

ERNIE JOHNSON, the other Tall Hat hand who had ridden with the brothers to Pawnee City, was already heading for the Antlers Bar where busily swinging batwing doors beat clocklike shafts of light and shadow across the rain-steamed road.

"Kirk will kill that chestnut," Mac

Greener grumbled. There was an undertone of kindness in the old rannyhan's voice and Kirby sensed that the gruff understanding in it was neither for Kirk nor the mare but for the Angus brother who stood gingerly on an aching foot.

Kirby said dryly, "She's not weighty enough for Kirk. He couldn't ride the grulla tonight. Foxy Cronin of Turkey Track pulled a tendon on his cayuse crossing the Dead Elk narrows last night. Hoofed it to our place, Kirk said, and borrowed the big roan, ran the legs off him before daylight and left him in the pasture."

Mac sighed softly in the darkness and the movement made him swell inside his dripping slicker. He seemed very huge and wise and old there in the half light. He said gently:

"Kid, a duce is no card unless it's wild, and honest players don't play wild cards. Foxy Cronin is a crooked cowman but he don't mistreat horseflesh. If he left his pony crippled, he carried his saddle away from it. It was me who found Kirk's grulla blowin' and sick in the meadow and it was me who gave him a rub down whilst Kirk was snorin' in his bunk. It was Kirk's saddle, not Foxy's, which I hung on the dryin' peg."

Mac turned and strode toward the saloon and Kirby stood with the rein in his face, weighing the old rider's heavy words. He recalled finding the gray-bronze bronc sleepy and trembling in the corral that morning and of rousing Kirk from a late sleep in the bunkhouse; of Kirk's incoherent, mumbling story of how the neighboring rancher had borrowed the horse during the night.

His face went bleak and stolid as he sifted Mac's words and his implications because he knew this man's rigorous and truthful code. He was heading down street toward Storm Shalott's cottage when he picked up the sound of men running on the boardwalk from the direction of the jail.

Ernie Johnson was among them and Ernie drifted into the shadow of an alley; and when Kirby reached his side he said from the corner of his mouth, "Enos Gold and a posse just locked up Foxy Cronin and two Turkey Track hands for a train robbery last night!"

They waited until the crowd's stragglers had passed toward the saloon, and Ernie continued: "Four masked gents held up the katy train out of Silver Bow. Shot a cow on the Redwillow grade and the dern fool engineer thought it was a boulder and stopped. They climbed aboard, lifted a ten-thousand-dollar government payroll in gold belongin' to the cavalrymen at the Crow reservation depot and then lit out. The fireman takes a shot at them and hits the sky. The gang didn't even bother to wet their powder answerin' him."

Kirby demanded, "How'd Enos Gold pin it on Foxy?" and there seemed to be an uneasy reluctance in Ernie's thoughtful silence before he replied, "I wouldn't know."

Two vague figures were cutting across the murky darkness of the street ahead of him as Kirby pulled his hatbrim down and headed again toward the houses on the slopes. He cut across a side lot toward the whitewashed cottage where Storm Shalott lived with her uncle, Enos Gold, Shawnee City's marshal and sheriff of the county.

He heard Kirby's gurgling laugh on the porch and then Storm's warm voice came across the dark yard, "Kirby, I hoped you'd come to say hello."

There was something grave and warm in her eyes as she stood before his tall brother, looking up at Kirby, and his edgy truculence dropped away.

A VOICE which was as dismally cold as the rain came from the corner of the house and over Storm's head Kirby saw a flare come and go in Kirk's eyes.

It was Enos Gold speaking:

"You Angus boys stand as you're put and don't think of the hardware you're carryin'. Kirk, I'm takin' you in, as I did Foxy Cronin, for train robbery! Kirby—stand hitched!"

Enos moved up on the porch, a lean, white-mustached dangerous man, and there was a catfooted deputy who slid

past him now and lifted Kirk's air-gun. The sheriff's eyes flicked over Storm and he said crisply, "Get inside, honey!"

Kirby said tautly. "Let's hear the story, Enos! Or have you forgot it's my brother you're arresting?"

"There's three of those train bandits in jail, son! Kirk, or the waddy who was ridin' a big roan with a Tall Hat brand, will make it four!"

Enos put an icy and unbending glare at Kirk and jerked his head in command. Kirk shrugged and turned briefly before he obeyed the marshal. Some message in his eyes flickered toward Kirby and, as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud, Kirby knew that command said:

See that I get out of that calaboose tonight!

Something pulled Kirby's attention to Storm, standing framed in the doorlight. She gave him a direct look which was sober and appealing, and dismally he reflected that she was silently echoing Kirk's own thoughts.

Half angrily Kirby trudged away after the disappearing lawmen and his brother, knowing already that Storm and Kirk, as always, would have their way with him.

A creaky high-wheeled freight wagon rounded a corner, coming past the jail, and Kirby recognized the Tall Hat cook, in for the ranch's weekly supplies. The hand left the mud-caked mule team hitched to a tie-rail and headed for the general store.

The sight of the heavily braced hoodlum wagon had caused some formless idea to tug at his mind and Kirby stepped into a dark shop doorway, rolling a smoke while he studied it. For a moment the ghost of a mischievous grin drove the grim anxiety from his lean, deeply tanned face. The wagon was the key to the jail's strong lock.

Kirby was an almost slight man with rawhide muscles. His eyes were as gray as smooth pebbles and his mouth amiable but slow to smile. He was a direct contrast to Kirk; big, domineering Kirk with the gay green eyes, fair hair, and a constant laugh . . .

Downstreet he saw Enos Gold leave the jail and head for the hotel where the county's judge and sole legal arbiter lived in his gouty bachelorhood. A long shadow could be seen through the jail office. Gold's deputy would be keeping guard. The one big cell, Kirby knew, was at the rear of the thick-walled log and dobe structure.

Kirby splashed across the street and untied the Tall Hat cook's mules from the tie rail. He looked once toward the Antlers Bar, but shrugged his thought away. He could use Mac and Ernie now but he could not ask them to help him defy the law in freeing a man from its custody. The gray, dismal certainty came that both men, loyal as they might be, suspected Kirk's guilt.

His cigarette became bitter as the flat taste of his own suspicions killed the tobacco's flavor.

Kirby climbed to the wagon seat, swinging the sliding mules away from the hitchrail. He guided them into the mouth of the alley between the Wells Fargo office and a feed store, and the street's noises faded behind him.

A right-angled turn took the wagon into a cross-alley, running behind the Antlers and the backlots of two stores, then into the ink-dark court behind the low-looming jail. A pasty gray suggestion of light came through the narrow barred window high above the ground. Kirby swung the mules away from the window, pulled them back against their neck yoke as he clucked soothingly; guiding the rear of the wagon toward the jail's back wall.

HE SAT for several minutes listening and there was no sound above the town's murmuring boisterousness and the flat hiss of the rainfall. Kirby felt with his foot below the wagon seat, finding that indispensable piece of equipment in all freight wagons—a log chain. He vaulted down, pulled the chain from the wagon bed and looped one end around the wagon's heavy rear axle where it met the main brace.

Now, climbing to the tall rear wheel

with the chain's hook end in his hand, Kirby was at a level with the barred jail window. He slapped at the window glass with the hook, hearing its jingling shatter, and he said hoarsely into the jail, "Flap your wings, Kirk! I'm opening her up!"

He looped the chain around three of the bars, pulling the hook back toward him and sliding its point through one of the links. He stepped swiftly back to the wagon seat, grabbing the reins and bracing his feet. He yelled shrilly at the mules, lashing with the reins as they lunged forward.

Kirby looked back just as the chain twanged like a great bow string. The back of the wagon rose from the ground for a moment and there was a terrific wrench; and a tangle of window frame and iron bars and studding flew through the air at the end of the chain.

Kirk came through the shattered window, dropping the five feet to the ground as Kirby hauled the mules to a halt and ran back. His brother was grinning hugely in the darkness. His smile died as he gripped Kirby's arm, saying shortly:

"You took your time! But thanks anyway, kid. Did you bring us guns? And horses?"

Kirby demanded thinly, "Am I an army? My cayuse and Mac's are at the Antler's tie-rail. I'll cover you till we get to 'em!"

He heard a scrambling at the jail window as Kirk whispered huskily. "Wait for Foxy and the others!"

"Damn the others! I'm not fronting for those Turkey Track outlaws!"

Kirk's face, vaguely above him in the gloom, went savage and ugly and Kirby saw that this man who was his brother had suddenly become a stranger.

"I'm backing Foxy's hand and so are you!" Kirk snarled. His hand made a deft, unexpected movement. Kirby was off guard and felt his holster suddenly light against his thigh and knew his six-gun was in Kirk's hand.

He saw Kirk running low and light-footed toward the square of light which was the alley's opening to the street. Three other dim figures dashed after Kirk and Kirby found himself, with a dull sickness making his steps heavy, unaccountably joining in their charge.

There was a desperate scramble for possession of horses from the string along the crowded rail. Kirby was knocked to the mud as Foxy Cronin, cruelly roweling a paint pony, nearly rode him down. Far up the street a man shouted out a crisp, excited alarm.

As Kirby swung to his own saddle he saw Mac Greener, silhouetted in the Antlers' batwings, his mouth agape. Mac's lips were moving in soundless profanity.

Kirby pounded after his brother and the Turkey Track men and saw them pull up and dart like night birds into an alley even before he heard the heavy pound of gunfire. Ahead, in the middle of the street, Sheriff Enos Gold stood with umbrella-like flames puffing from the .45's in his hands.

Kirby's horse slipped and stumbled as he tried to turn. Men were running toward the alley's mouth and Kirby pulled his horse around, spured it into a dead gallop down the street and cut across a wagon yard.

There was a high board fence closing the other end of the yard, Kirby recalled. He cut left through the backlot of a shabby shack, hoping to clear the clutter of Pawnee City's houses and reach the prairie.

Something reached out of the darkness, grabbing him at the belly and lifting him from his floundering horse. He seemed to soar through the air for many minutes; there was an agonizing jar and all thought and feeling exploded inside him and then ribboned away.

Above him a clothes line swayed in the wind and across the lot a riderless horse snorted uneasily . . .

WHEN Kirby swam out of the black pit into which he had plunged, the blinding light of a kesosene lamp splashed pain into his eyes. He closed them, fighting a swimming head. An exploring hand told him that his clothing

Kirby walked inside and Storm Shalott came forward quickly, but she uttered no word to him.

and the chair on which he sat were caked with mud.

He squinted against the light. This was Sheriff Gold's office and the old lawman sat across the room in a big round chair, fashioned from a hogshead. Mac Greener and Ernie Johnson hulked together on a bench at the wall, eyeing him soberly.

"Nice shindig you throwed, Kirby," Gold said dryly. "Right nice. Jail tore open like a paper box. Kirk and those Turkey Track sidewinders headin' for the Redwillow Hills. And if it wasn't for a widder woman's clothesline, you'd be with 'em." The sheriff frowned wryly.

"Reckon I'd be better off with them now," Kirby said resignedly.

"I reckon," Gold agreed and fell grimly silent, seemingly lost in thought.

Bitterness made Kirby's voice curt: "Look, Enos, a man if he's a man at all will finght for his own kin. When you prove Kirk had a hand in that train job, I'll admit I did wrong in taking cards in the game!"

"Look, kid, get smart!" It was Mac Greener's angrily amused voice. "Foxy Cronin's crowbait didn't pull any tendon, like Kirk told you. The fireman on that katy train throwed some lead at those 'hooters! The mare was hit. Enos and a posse found it dead where it fell. The trail was easy to read. Tracks showed Foxy mounted double with someone else

—someone riding a big horse."

Kirby said hoarsely, "Get on with it."

The sheriff unfolded from his chair and lifted a denim jumper from a wall peg. "Foxy's," he said briefly and held the jacket close to the lamplight.

A sleeve of the garment was caked with clay, dried now and strangely blue in the lampglow.

"That same blue clay was on Kirk's dirty shirt which he shucked off last night in the bunkhouse," Mac supplied. "And it was on his saddle when I rubbed it off and slapped it over th' kak-pole."

Kirby rubbed dry lips with his tongue; he looked in turn at Enos and Mac and Ernie Johnson, and nodded wearily in surrender. "I'll take my spanking, Enos," he said.

"What's done is done, boy," Gold said gently. "You're likely th' last feller to guess that folks hereabouts have always known you're solid rock—that Kirk is quicksand. Ain't plumb excusin' you though. You owe th' law a debt."

Gold fumbled in the drawer of his untidy desk and produced a tarnished star; and he bent over and pinned it on Kirby's vest.

"I'm makin' you a special deputy. Bring back the packrats you let out of th' sack. That includes Kirk! Otherwise don't come back yourself, or I'll tag you for plottin' a jail break!"

Walking stiffly, joints sore from his fall, Kirby pushed through the curious throng outside the jail, heading up the street.

A voice at his elbow said, "I'll round us up some horses, kid," and he turned and saw Ernie Johnson grinning whitely in the dark. Looming large behind Ernie was Mac.

Kirby growled, "Cut a stick, you jugheads, this is my funeral," and Mac Greener, watching Ernie trot down the street, drawled, "That ain't th' way th' fortune-teller lady told it to me, friend." The big rannyhan fell into step purposefully beside him.

There was plenty of trouble ahead, and they didn't know its exact nature.

THE TRIO left Pawnee City's dimming lights behind, pushing toward Tall Hat. The rain had stopped and the stars shone crisply cold; and, through his resentful rage against his brother, Kirby kept seeing in front of him the image of Storm Shalott and the appeal in her eyes when Kirk had been exposed.

They reached Tall Hat two hours before dawn. The place was lifeless, and Mac chuckled, "Cookie's still in Pawnee City lookin' for his mules and wagon." The big puncher set about fixing breakfast while Ernie unsaddled the horses and snaked fresh mounts from the corrals.

Kirby walked into the tiny ranchhouse, unbuckled his empty gunbelt, and from a wall hook lifted the heavy twin-holstered harness which hung there. The two matched .44s were well-oiled, fully loaded, though they had never been used since his father died.

The three's silence over Mac's scorched but tasty breakfast was broken when Kirby asked, "If some wild lads, fresh out of jail, headed for the Redwillow Hills—meaning the Turkey Track-would that mean they had their wampum cached there? Like what they might have stolen in a train robbery."

Mac and Ernie looked at him innocently as if unaware that he had purposefully avoided using Kirk's name.

"Nope," said Ernie. "Turkey Track would be th' first place th' law would search. They'd hide it in a bird's nest or a gopher hole or somewhere and split it when the hullabaloo dies down."

"Let's hit leather!" said Kirby and strode to the veranda where Ernie had tied their broncs. He led the way along a wagon trail leading to Tall Hat's back pastures; when the trail forked, he cut left, ascending a winding suggestion of path up toward the Redwillow Hills.

They came into a clearing and followed another beaten, well-defined trail which skirted Tall Hat's upper meadow. Cows were grazing here, most of them heavy with calf, and Kirby reflected it was time this herd was moved down to the valley floor.

The dawn, crystal-clear and sparkling after the night's rain, came suddenly as they cut into the sparse foothill timber. Ahead through the jackpine a great bald hill humped its back and below it was the glitter of water in a small pond. From somewhere above them came a dull, rhythmic sound; a pulsing, steady sound magnified by the timbers, thumping like an over-stressed and straining heart inside the mountain.

It was a hydraulic ram. Kirby remembered how proud Kirk and himself had been when they purchased the strange pump from an eastern factory. It was smaller than the catalogue pictured it but they proudly harnessed it to a tiny spring, trickling feebly from a crevice in the big ball hill.

They'd hacked out a shallow pool in the shale and clay base of the ridge, creating ever-accessible water for their cattle.

It was the inventive Kirk who had chopped a box-like hole under a ledge beside the pulsing hydraulic ram, lining it with clay and slabs and moss and fitting it with a sheet iron door. Good as an ice-box, Kirk had boasted. In it they stored meats and canned peaches and tomatoes for use at the nearby line cabin.

Kirby sensed that Mac and Ernie, sitting their horses behind him, would be reading his thoughts by now. The line cabin had not been used by the brothers or their crew for over two months.

By now the rain-washed blue clay of the hill should have covered and hidden the door of the tiny cellar under the ledge. They were fifty yards away from the thudding hydraulic pump. But the sheet iron door could be seen plainly, a rusty and incongruous patch on the clay face of the hill.

They slid from their saddles, leaving their cayuses at the timber's edge. Kirby led the way and he could hear Mac's deep breathing behind him. When they reached the little cellar, Kirby said in a thin, tired voice, "Open her up, boys, I've got a hunch there's some groceries in here Sheriff Gold would like to recover."

IT WAS Mac who reached a long arm inside and handed out the three heavy canvas bags, sealed with metal government tags.

They had lugged the outlaw loot back into the screening trees and had lashed the bags to their saddles when high above them in the dense spruce crown of the ridge a jay gibbered angrily. A moment later they heard a horse, wearily blowing, and there was the vague halftone of a man's voice.

Kirby jerked his head and they moved afoot back toward the springs, catwalking noiselessly on the brown-black humus of pine needles.

Clumps of chokeberry gave them a curtain at the clearing's edge and they unlimbered their six-guns and knelt there waiting.

A rider appeared from the mouth of the upper trail; the bobbing heads of three others were behind him, and the leader was Kirk. Kirby saw his brother's eyes dart over the clearing; saw his head toss in assurance to the others and the four rode out of the trees now and dismounted.

Foxy Cronin's voice floated across the clearing. "Wait here," he told the two Turkey Track men and he followed Kirk toward the hollowly thumping hydraulic ram.

Kirk's teeth flashed in a white grin as he thumped a fist against the cache door.

"Open her up, Foxy! We shoud have been here before daylight. Let's make the split and scatter—fast!"

The sheet iron door rang tinnily and the renegade rancher stiffened; and now he whirled, his red, piggish eyes boring into Kirk. "You sold us out! You dirty rattler! You told your brother where we hid the stuff!"

"You're a liar!" Kirk's voice was like a whip and his hand dropped menacingly to the handle of his gun.

Foxy's eyes shifted over Kirk's shoulder and it was a signal; and all of this Kirby sensed too late. One of the cold-eyed Turkey Track gunmen, standing a few yards behind Kirk, aimed and fired calmly and the bullet which broke Kirk's back and drove the life out of him threw

him forward, face downward in the blue clay of the springs.

A .45 spoke at Kirby's side above Mac's roaring curse and the Turkey Track killer grabbed his belly and died with the blood gushing from his mouth.

The other outlaw dove for his horse and the frightened animal swung away as Kirby's bullet caught the man in the shoulder, spinning him around. The man fell and fired from the ground and Kirby heard Ernie Johnson grunt as the slug tore through his arm.

Through this thundering violence Foxy Cronin stood, a frustrated and motionless man. The blow of finding his stolen riches gone had apparently left him too stunned to realize the disaster closing in about him.

The wounded Turkey Track man had pushed himself to his knees and now to his feet and Mac Greener was walking toward him. They both fired at once and the outlaw's face became a red smear as he went backward. Mac turned slowly toward Foxy Cronin and Kirby's voice stopped him:

"This pigeon is mine, Mac!"

Through the whirling red haze of his grief and rage he saw Cronin step across Kirk's body and come carefully forward; his beady eyes were blinking suspiciously as Kirby reholstered his guns.

Kirby's words stopped the Turkey Track man as he said, "I'm wearing a badge, Foxy, and to keep my word to Enos Gold I'm giving you a chance to surrender and come in alive. If Enos don't hang you, I promise that I'll kill you anyway! That will be for Kirk! I'm hoping you refuse to come in!"

"With three of you jaspers agin me what choice do I have?" the renegade sneered.

Kirby said:

"Mac! Ernie! Drop your cutters on the ground. Go back to the horses and wait!"

The two Tall Hat men stood silent for several heavy seconds. Kirby heard Mac's soft sigh as the implication of the command became plain and then he heard their reluctant retreat into the timber's fringe.

"Now, Foxy," Kirby said softly. "What will it be?"

CRONIN shrugged elaborately, a disarming gesture of futility, and stepped forward; and the catlike swiftness of his sudden shift to one side, the whipping downward of a lightning hand had the skill of some evil magic. His bullet whispered of coming death as it went by Kirby's ear.

Kirby's own draw was swift but, even as he swept his six-gun up, he saw Foxy grinning evilly and leveling his .45 for a second shot.

Kirby pulled the trigger and saw Foxy lurch awkwardly. The outlaw was fighting for footing in the treacherous blue mud.

Foxy fired as he fell, his bullet going wild, and Kirby's second shot, echoing on the heels of the first, tore through the Turkey Track man's body before he hit the ground.

Cronin stiffened and became still and the echoes of gun fire ran their dying race into the hills and the trees; and the thumping cadence of the hydraulic pump pounded its sane and peaceful song.

THEY pulled up in front of Sheriff Gold's office that afternoon, three Tall Hat riders and a mule-drawn hoodlum wagon. A tarpaulin covered the four bodies in the straw-softened wagon bed.

Kirby slid from his saddle and said, "Mac, take Ernie to the doc and get his arm patched."

He put his dull stare on Enos Gold and saw pity and understanding and pride in the old lawman's eyes.

"I'm delivering the stolen gold and them who took it, Enos, I'm turning in my badge and riding home, if that's agreeable to you."

"Your debt ain't quite paid off, son," Enos said gruffly. He gestured with his thumb. "Go into my office. I'll be seeing you later."

Kirby walked inside and Storm Sha-

lott, seated at her uncle's desk, came quickly forward; she uttered no word but was suddenly, naturally in his arms, sobbing bitterly.

"I'm so sorry, Kirby! So sorry for you! But it had to end this way, I suppose, and now that it is over perhaps it is the best way."

Kirby forced his raspy words through a tightened throat. "Sorry for me? Why me? It's you it's roughest on."

"No, Kirby. Not me. It's aways been roughest on you. Why did you listen to him? Why did you help him escape?"

Kirby pushed her away, looking down at her in bewilderment.

"Why did I help him? I thought that was what you wanted. When you looked at me there on your porch—I knew what you wanted to say."

"I was trying to tell you *not* to obey him—*not* to let him drag you with him," Storm said gently.

Kirby sank giddily into a chair. "I guess I'm not good at understanding women," he sighed. "Reckon I've never learned to read what their eyes are saying."

"I've been wondering for months if you'd ever learn," Storm said.

She was walking slowly toward his chair. Her eyes were dancing and mischievous and almost tearful. A blind man could have read the message there.

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This advertisement prepared by the War Advertising Council. Space contributed by this publication.

By ROSS CALHOUN

AMES CALDWELL, sheriff of Salvation, had two boasts. The first that he'd never shot at a man with the intent to kill, and the second that he'd kept the peace. And this after eighteen years of star-toting. The last three years of this long regime he'd never even drawn his gun on a man, and this also was a sign that he knew his town. He knew how to play one end against the other; he knew how to ride the fence without falling off.

He sat in Ed Murphy's barber chair, head tilted back, face lathered with white cream, a weather-beaten man with gray in his black hair, and a sense of humor lurking in the depth of his pale blue eyes.

Murphy lifted the razor, squinted through the window, and said casually.

"Two o' Mulvaney's boys ridin' in, Ames."

Ames Caldwell stared at the ceiling, crow's-feet wrinkles around the corners of his eyes deepening. He moistened his lips where there was no lather, and said nothing. Mulvaney's hands coming into town today meant trouble—the first bit of trouble Ames Caldwell had had in several years. Accustomed to a reign of peace, he disliked anything which tended to disturb it.

"Cannivan," Ed Murphy said, "an' Joe Beckhurst. Hitchin' up outside the Silver Bell."

That one punch knocked the man half-way across the road.

SHERIFF OF SALVATION

For years the sheriff had been keeping the peace without even having to draw his gun, but now he realized that those days were over. Either he had to assert himself, or forever forfeit his authority

Ames Caldwell waited for more. He liked Murphy's shop because it was in the center of the town, commanding a view of the square. Murphy could shave a man without nicking him, and at the same time keep his customer informed of every move on the outside. Murphy enjoyed this latter task more than his regular employment.

"Jeff McLain come in an hour ago," Murphy went on. "Saturday he does his buyin' fer the week."

"I saw him," Ames murmured. He'd seen McLain's battered little buckboard with the old white horse hitched up outside George Lee's General Store.

"Nice boy—that McLain," Murphy said, "even if he is a nester, Ames. He'll make a good son-in-law."

SHERIFF CALDWELL'S lip twitched slightly. In a week young McLain was supposed to marry Rose Caldwell. The sheriff of Salvation had made no comments when his daughter informed him of the event. He'd half-expected it because McLain had been riding into town quite often, and when a man rode thirty-two miles one way, and thirty-two miles back, to see a girl, it meant that he had intentions.

Ed Murphy stopped to sharpen his razor on the strap, and Ames Caldwell listened to the sharp, slapping sound, the frown deepening on his face. The peace of Salvation was to be broken very abruptly, and he knew it. Lace Mulvaney, owner of the little Rainbow outfit up on the Horn River, did not like Jeff McLain's homestead in Cross Canyon even though McLain had every right in the world to settle there, the Canyon being free country.

Mulvaney had stated flatly that he wanted McLain out of the Canyon in two weeks, and ten days of those two weeks had already passed with McLain still working on his house. Ames Caldwell realized that a man like Mulvaney was not the one to make idle threats. Mulvaney and his riders had come to the Horn River country a year ago; they'd come from the south—the land of trouble—and Ames had been expecting trouble from them for a long time. In the first place Mulvaney's herd seemed to grow in leaps and bounds even though the Horn River range was not known to be good cow country.

"Let me know when they come out of the Silver Bell," Caldwell said softly. It was not unusual for Mulvaney's riders to come to Salvation on a Saturday, but they didn't usually come at this early hour in the afternoon. It added up to this—that there would be a show-down with McLain in town. Though why they had picked the town, rather than riding over to McLain's shack in the Canyon, was something of a mystery.

Ames Caldwell pondered over this, as well as other things. Mulvaney and McLain had had no trouble aside from the fact that McLain had settled in the Canyon; and Mulvaney could have run his stock in the Canyon six months ago—before McLain had come to Salvation—if he'd wanted to. The Canyon was not good beef country either.

"Lots o' trouble over nothin'," Ed Murphy grunted. "McLain thinks he can grow things in that damned Canyon. Mulvaney knows it's no good for cows. Why in hell the trouble?"

"It'll come out," Ames said. He was patient that way, never putting his nose into something that did not directly concern him, but this did. Rose was his only daughter, and even if he didn't particularly care for her choice of a husband, he had to stand by her in this business. She loved Jeff McLain, and that was all that mattered. McLain was in the right in taking his quarter section in Cross Canyon, and Lace Mulvaney was in the wrong in threatening to drive him out. All the law was on McLain's side, but Mulvaney had the guns.

"It ain't my business," Murphy said, "but she'd had no trouble, Ames, if she'd picked Farrel Brown instead o' McLain."

Ames Caldwell didn't say anything to this, but privately Brown, owner of the Box B, had been his choice. Farrel Brown had made a play for Rose even before

Jeff McLain came from the east, definitely a farmer, loving the soil, a lot of crazy ideas in his head as to new methods of farming.

"You wouldn't see Mulvaney buckin' Brown," the barber said.

Sheriff Caldwell nodded. Brown's Box B was one of the biggest spreads on the bench. Farrel Brown had two dozen riders working for him. He was head of the Cattleman's Association of Salvation.

"This is my trouble as well as Jeff's," she said. "I want to know how bad it is."

"Cannivan and Beckhurst comin' out," Murphy said suddenly. "Kind o' walkin' down toward Lee's store, Ames."

"Finish up," Sheriff Caldwell told him. He told himself that he didn't like this business, and he wasn't sure how he should act if it came to a show-down. He didn't want gun-play. He liked his job and he liked to live. He knew how to acquire votes at every election to assure himself of victory at the polls. He had a lot of friends in Salvation, and no enemies to speak of. There had been talk recently of Lace Mulvaney's sudden prosperity and the sudden dropping off in the size of herds adjoining his Rainbow. That, however, was only talk, and Ames Caldwell saw no reason for popping off until he had his facts, and even then he preferred a quiet settlement of disputes.

The barber was almost finished with the shave when he said quickly, "McLain's comin' out to his wagon, Ames. Cannivan an' Beckhurst are crossin' the street."

AMES CALDWELL sat up abruptly, wiped the last bit of lather from his face with the napkin, and stepped from the chair. He caught up his hat at the door and stepped into the street, a hot blast of air bringing the sweat to his face again. It had been fairly cool in the barber shop with the shades halfdrawn.

Standing here for a brief moment, he could see the two Mulvaney hands angling across the square toward the General Store. He saw also Jeff McLain's battered buckboard, unpainted, the seat hanging at an angle, the white horse drooping in the traces, swishing flies with its tail.

McLain, tall, angular, reddish-haired, was loading a bag of flour to the wagon floor. As in everything, the nester worked without haste. He was typical of the men of the soil, Ames thought, deliberate, calm, and yet the way he lifted the heavy sack, displayed plenty of power.

McLain was unarmed. The faded blue levis hung loosely around his long legs; he wore a gray flannel shirt, and his hat was a cheap one he'd purchased in Lee's store.

The two Mulvaney hands walked with the awkward roll of the puncher, heavy six-guns swinging at their sides. Beckhursts on the left side, indicating that he used a left-hand draw. Both men were grinning, sombreros pulled down over lean brown faces, both of them on the short side, hawk-faced. Ames Caldwell had seen that type of man, years before, down in the tough towns of Dodge City and Hays.

McLain hadn't seen them, or seeing them, went on about his business. Walking down the street toward the square, Ames Caldwell saw the nester turn his back on the two punchers, and walk back into the store for the remainder of his purchases.

Beckhurst and Cannivan pulled up alongside the wagon, exchanged a few words, and then Beckhurst slid a pocket knife from his levis, opened the blade, and slashed it across the sack of flour. The white powder burst out through the slit. Beckhurst caught hold of the top of the bag and yanked it to the end of the wagon, the flour spilling out into the dust of the road.

Both men were grinning when Jeff McLain came out of the store. His hands were empty and he walked a little faster than usual. He had his face half-turned away from Sheriff Caldwell, and Ames could not make out the expression.

"We figured on goin' easy with you, nester," Beckhurst started to say, but he got no farther.

Jeff McLain lashed out with a big fist, catching the smaller man squarely on the chin, and knocking him half across the road. Beckhurst hit the dust with his back and lay there, blinking, head lolling from side to side, too dazed to go for his gun.

Cannivan's right hand was on the butt of his gun when Ames Caldwell called sharply from the walk:

"That's far enough, Sam."

Sam Cannivan turned slowly, trying to watch McLain and Caldwell at the same time. Ames Caldwell saw the contempt creep into the puncher's slate-gray eyes.

"Now, sheriff," Cannivan murmured, "you'll keep yore damned nose—"

IT WAS then that Jeff McLain stepped forward again, swinging the same fist. Cannivan yelled as the nester's hard knuckles cracked against his cheekbone. He'd started to move so the punch did not land solidly. The second one did. McLain, with the same deliberateness, aimed and swung, hitting Cannivan on the jaw. The Mulvaney rider sat in the dust, mouth open.

Ames Caldwell stared at the nester in surprise. He'd never pictured Jeff McLain as a fighting man, and this was a revelation to him. Still the nester did not seem particularly excited. He was breathing a little heavier, and when he looked down at the spilled flour, his lips seemed to grow tighter, but that was all.

"Thanks, sheriff," McLain said. "Sorry I had to bring you into this."

Ames Caldwell licked his lips, remembering the contempt he'd seen in Cannivan's eyes. Jeff McLain had somewhat the same expression in his mild blue eyes, only it was tempered with pity. This nest-

er felt sorry for him!

"Hell!" Ames growled. "I'm the peace in this damned town, McLain."

"All right," Jeff said. "It's just too bad that it happened all around." He went into the store and came out with a box of purchases. He managed to save about half the flour by getting down on his hands and knees and folding up the flour sack gingerly.

Quite a crowd had gathered around when the fight started, and they were watching him. Ames Caldwell felt a little ashamed that his prospective son-in-law should be down on his hands and knees scraping up flour that any rancher on the bench would kick into the dust of the road. He watched Sam Cannivan and Beckhurst climbing to their feet a few moments later, still rather dizzy, and he felt also a thrill of pride. McLain had flattened both these men with his fists, and they'd been carrying guns!

"Reckon you boys better clear out," Ames said quietly.

They looked at him, and then they looked at McLain loading his half sack of flour onto the buckboard. McLain climbed up on the seat, nodded to Caldwell and started down the street, giving the two Mulvaney hands a clear view of his back.

"Sheriff," Beckhurst said slowly, "I reckon Lace ain't gonna like this."

"Now," Ames Caldwell said, "ain't that too bad." He could read the cards very clearly now. This was the end of his reign of peace. Whether he liked it or not, he'd been pushed off the fence where he'd been sitting for eighteen years. He didn't want any trouble with Mulvaney, but he was getting it.

He watched the two Rainbow hands mount and ride out of town, going in the opposite direction to that McLain had taken. He knew the nester had not gone directly home. Jeff would have his buckboard parked outside the door of the sheriff's house off Washington Street. He'd be talking to Rose in that quiet way.

GEORGE COLEMAN, the gambler, from the Crown Saloon, crossed over to where Ames was standing. Coleman had a long black cigar between his teeth and his black, flat-crowned sombrero low over his eyes.

The nester was very calm, totally unafraid as he came down the street.

"I figured you were a smarter man, Ames," he smiled.

"That boy was unarmed," Caldwell snapped, and Cannivan was drawing a gun on him.

Coleman shook his head sagely. "Sam Cannivan wouldn't be fool enough to shoot down an unarmed man, Ames. He may have frightened him a little, made him eat dirt. You shouldn't have been drawn into it." Coleman bit on the cigar and added, "Of course you have to look after the new son-in-law, Ames."

"Reckon McLain did pretty well for himself," Ames growled. He saw the logic

in Coleman's explanation, and it galled him to think that he'd been drawn into the affair. He could have stayed in Murphy's barber shop, knowing all, hearing all, and seeing nothing. He knew that he'd gone out for Rose's sake.

"Lace Mulvaney will try to drive you out of town," Coleman said, "just to prove to himself that he can do it."

Ames Caldwell nodded grimly. Mulvaney was a younger man, a tougher man, reputed to be very fast with a six-gun. Even in his youth when he'd taken the star, Ames never had made any pretentions that he was a killer, and with advancing age he'd been content to cajole the drunks and hard cases who came into Salvation seeking trouble.

"Don't worry about it," Ames growled. He walked down the street toward his office, a little cubby-hole, with a battered oak, roll-top desk, a few chairs, and a bulletin board. He stood in front of the desk, fingers of his right hand caressing the butt of the heavy Navy Colt at his side. The big gun seemed suddenly heavier than usual, and he wondered just how fast Mulvaney could draw.

He had other thoughts about Mulvaney also. Why had Lace chosen the town to show up McLain? What was Mulvaney's quarrel with McLain in the first place, inasmuch as Rainbow didn't seem to want Cross Canyon?

He sat down in his chair behind the desk and stared grimly at the fly-specked bulletin board. He didn't like the way Cannivan had looked at him; nor the way McLain had looked at him. He didn't like George Coleman intimating that Mulvaney would drive him from Salvation. In those few seconds on the square he'd come face to face with himself, and the respect which he thought he had in this town was nothing but a cloak of rags. Salvation tolerated him because he was getting old. He maintained the peace because the town was growing up and there were few toughs to break it. When men like Mulvaney reared up, there was no peace.

Peace had its own price.

HE HEARD steps outside the door fifteen minutes later, and then Farrel Brown came in, big, brown-haired, smooth-shaven, a good-looking man. Staring at him, Ames Caldwell wondered again why Rose had turned the big rancher down for a man like McLain, honest, but as poor as a church mouse.

"I heard it from Bill Tompkins," Brown said. "If Mulvaney tries anything, Caldwell, you have the Box B behind you." He sat down in a chair across the room, and it squeaked as his two hundred and twenty pounds threatened the legs.

Sheriff Caldwell moistened his lips. Fifteen minutes had passed, but the story had already made the rounds. By nightfall every voter in the county would know that there was trouble between Mulvaney and Ames Caldwell.

"I can have a few of the boys stay around town," Brown was saying. "That damned Rainbow outfit's been getting too tough anyway."

Ames Caldwell felt the shame of this thing. He was the law in Salvation, and Farrel Brown was trying to protect him!

"Reckon I'll handle this my way, Farrel," Ames said quietly.

Brown nodded, searching his face carefully. Then he leaned back, and Ames knew what he was thinking. The big rancher expected him to ride out and make amends with Mulvaney—kid him along, get back in the middle of the road, and let Mulvaney finish his private business with McLain. That meant Jeff McLain would either pick up and clear out of Cross Canyon, or he would be buried there!

"You're the sheriff, Caldwell," Brown smiled.

"I'll remember it," Ames told him, and then he remembered that Brown had been trying to befriend him, and he changed the tone of his voice. This was the first time he'd seen Farrel Brown since Rose had announced her engagement to Jeff McLain. He said quietly, "Sorry it worked out that way with Rose, Farrel. I'd been hoping you'd be the one."

The big rancher shrugged. He smiled,

but Ames Caldwell saw that it was forced.

"Tell Rose I wish her all the happiness in the world," Brown said. "If McLain needs anything from Box B, he can have it."

When Farrel Brown went out, Ames Caldwell shook his head in disgust. McLain was a good man and a brave one, even though poor, but Brown had these two characteristics, and he'd also built up his Box B outfit till it was the biggest on the bench, and Brown had started with practically nothing! Still Rose Caldwell had chosen the nester.

AMES CALDWELL had an early supper that night, eating with McLain and Rose in the kitchen. The nester had decided to stay over and return to his shack on Sunday afternoon.

Ames frowned when he heard that. Each Saturday night Lace Mulvaney came into Salvation, and the word would spread that McLain was still in town. Possibly, Mulvaney would force the issue this very night!

"Jeff tells me he had some trouble with Mulvaney's hands," Rose said quietly. She was a tall girl, dark-haired, like her mother had been, the same quiet face, brown eyes.

Ames tried to laugh it off. "Reckon Sam Cannivan had a few drinks in him," he chuckled. He watched Jeff McLain's big hands on the table, fingers intertwined. The nester was quite calm, as steady as a rock.

"They were both as sober as judges," Rose said. She was smiling a little as she looked at her father. "This is my trouble as well as Jeff's, dad," she added. "I want to know how bad it is."

"I'll talk to Mulvaney," Ames muttered. "There won't be any trouble."

"Why not let me handle it?" McLain said.

"Hell!" Ames Caldwell exploded. "I'm the sheriff in this town. If there's trouble, I'm supposed to stop it."

McLain only nodded. He looked at Rose, and then at his hands again.

Ames Caldwell got up and walked over for his hat. The sun was falling, big and red, dropping down behind the row of wooden buildings on Ball Street. It flashed red on the windows along the opposite side of the road.

Ames strapped on his gun-belt, feeling its great weight. It was a funny thing that he'd never noticed that before. It would take a man a long time to get a weapon like that into action. Maybe he would have been better off using a smaller Smith & Wesson .44, or even a .38.

Ed Murphy, the barber, stood in the doorway of his empty shop, stroking his heavy stomach.

"Lace didn't come in yet, Ames," he said when the sheriff walked past.

Ames Caldwell grunted and went on. He saw Farrel Brown come out of the Silver Bell Saloon, pull down his black sombrero with both hands, and then walk across the square toward Ed Murphy's. Brown wore a Colt .45 on his hip, and it looked small there, like a toy.

Ames went into the Red Lion Saloon and stood at the far end of the bar. It was 7:30 in the evening, and this was an old custom with him, going back fifteen years. Ben Allison, the bartender, took a bottle down from the shelf and set it in front of him, along with a glass. Ames took one drink, wiped his lips, and then turned to look over the bat-wing doors. That was the only drink he would take all night. There were eleven saloons and two dance halls in Salvation. From eight o'clock until three in the morning he would be making his rounds from one to the other, chatting with old friends, laughing and joking with a drunk who figured on making trouble, getting that drunk in a good mood again.

"What in hell is up in Cross Canyon?" Allison asked. "Nothin' but dirt. Why is Mulvaney so damned peeved?"

"It'll blow over," Ames said.

It was getting quite dark outside and the lights were going on in the houses across the way. The big Roseland dance hall up the street gave out with a few experimental strains of music from the four piece orchestra.

Allison walked over to light two kero-

sene wall brackets at the other end of the bar. When he came back, he said softly,

"Here's trouble, Ames."

A MAN was coming through the bat-wing doors, a tall man with narrow shoulders, definitely sloped. He had a hooked nose and a pair of small blue eyes which were never still. A pearl-handled .45 swung at his hip. The .45 had the sights filed off because Lace Mulvaney didn't want them to catch on the holster when he brought it out for action. Ames Caldwell knew that most of the hard cases in Dodge City and Hays had followed this practice. When you shoot at a distance of ten or a dozen feet, you don't need sights; you need speed.

Mulvaney came straight to the point, and he spoke in a soft voice, no wrath in it. Ames had never heard Mulvaney lift his voice, and yet no one in Salvation had attempted to cross the boss of the Rainbow outfit.

"Now," Mulvaney smiled, "I hear there has been some trouble with my boys, sheriff."

Ames nodded. He felt the sweat breaking out around the temples, and he wondered if he were afraid.

"Reckon Sam and Joe bit off more than they could chew," he said.

Mulvaney nodded. He had a pointed face and a very small mouth with thin lips.

"Still," he grinned, "I figure the boys could o' taken care of themselves, sheriff, if you'd looked the other way."

Ames Caldwell felt the red coming into his face. The Red Lion was not crowded at this early hour, but there was a half dozen pairs of ears, and they were listening to what Mulvaney had to say. Very deliberately, Mulvaney was telling him where to get off, intimating that he'd acted that way in the past. The insult was cold and calculated.

Ames Caldwell straightened up. He opened his mouth, but Mulvaney spoke first.

"We want that nester out of this county," Mulvaney smiled, "an' we're puttin' him out. Any man figures on interferin' can always have a little talk with me."

Ames Caldwell stared at him steadily, knowing where the fault lay. He was to blame himself for this predicament. When a rancher could walk into a public saloon and tell the legally elected sheriff to stay out of the way, it meant that the situation was out of control. He'd been too easy—possibly because he was afraid; possibly because he did not like trouble and looked for the easy way.

"Maybe," Ames said slowly, "we'll have that little talk, Lace."

Mulvaney's grin widened. "The pleasure, sheriff," he chuckled, "will be all mine." The contempt still held in the rancher's blue eyes, and Ames realized Mulvaney thought he was bluffing. They remembered him in times past.

Mulvaney hitched at his gun-belt, scratched his nose, and walked out of the door. Ames Caldwell leaned heavily on the bar and looked at the empty glass before him.

"Better have another one," Ben Allison said.

Ames saw a man slip out the side door, and he knew that in ten minutes the town of Salvation would know that Lace Mulvaney had told the sheriff off. The county voters had tolerated him for a good many years. After tonight they would think differently. If one man could do it, another could also. The tough punchers coming in on a Saturday night would remember that when they were in their cups.

Ames walked to an empty card table in the corner, sat down heavily, and picked up a deck. This was directly contrary to his usual routine, and Ben Allison watched him carefully as he set the cards out in solitaire array.

"Looks like a hard night, Ames," the bartender said.

Sheriff Caldwell shrugged. He got up a half hour later and walked stiffly out into the street, one thing solid in his mind. Mulvaney wanted trouble, and he wanted it immediately. That trouble would center around Jeff McLain.

AMES CALDWELL walked back to his own house, and entered the side door to the kitchen. Rose was washing dishes. When she looked up, he noted that her face was paler than usual.

"Where's Jeff?" Ames asked.

"He said he would stop in to see Boyd Johnson about some fencing material," the daughter said.

Ames licked his lips. He stared at her steadily and he read what was in her mind. McLain knew Mulvaney was in town, and the nester had deliberately stepped outside. The showdown would come tonight. Rose Caldwell did not want her father mixed in it, and yet she was afraid for Jeff's sake because he was no match for men like Mulvaney, Cannivan, and Beckhurst.

"Farrel Brown sends his best wishes'" Ames said dully. He saw a light come into her eyes and he didn't understand that. There was also a certain tightening of the jaw which surprised him. Brown had not been a too ardent suitor because in everything he was an easy-going man, and things naturally came to him. He'd expected Rose Caldwell to come the same way, but she hadn't.

"Mulvaney's going to kill Jeff," Rose said slowly. "You know that, dad."

"He'll try," Ames told her, "but he'll have to kill me first." He went out then before his daughter could say any more, and he felt better. When he walked down Lincoln Street, he felt like the man he'd been twenty years ago when the blood ran warm in his veins. He'd had his pride then, and he didn't have to walk the middle of the road. He'd almost relished trouble, and then when it ceased coming, he began to avoid it.

He paused in the darkness directly opposite Martman's gun shop. McLain was coming out of the store, and the nester had a six-gun strapped around his waist. The light was poor, but there was no mistaking the tall figure of the farmer.

Watching him walk slowly toward the Square, Ames Caldwell felt a small thrill of pride. Jeff McLain was no gunfighter and he knew it. It was probable that the nester had never shot a six-gun in his life, and if he had, he'd never used it on a man, yet McLain was going up to see Mulvaney. McLain was fighting for his right to a spot of dirt. He knew that if he could be chased out of Cross Canyon he could be chased out of every place he went. Nesters were not too well liked in any county.

Ames walked on the opposite side of the street, keeping a little to McLain's rear. He saw the younger man's face as McLain walked in front of the well-lighted Roseland dance hall. The nester was very calm, totally unafraid.

McLain crossed the Square and entered the Red Lion Saloon. Ames was about to step into the gutter himself when a man called softly from a doorway. It was Ed Murphy, the barber. Ames noted with surprise that Murphy's shop was already closed, and usually on a Saturday, Ed didn't turn out the lights till midnight.

"All right, Ed," Ames said. "Make it quick."

"Nothin' to worry about yet," Murphy chuckled. "Mulvaney ain't in the Red Lion. He an' Cannivan an' Beckhurst are in the Silver Bell."

Ames nodded. He walked over to the doorway in which Murphy stood, understanding now why the barber had closed up. Ed wanted a front seat to this little drama about to explode in Salvation.

"Damn!" Murphy mumbled excitedly. "That boy's got nerve, Ames. Imagine him buyin' a gun! Why, Mulvaney will shoot the boy full o' holes!"

Ames Caldwell stared at the lighted entrance to the Red Lion Saloon.

"Any man forces a gun fight in this town, Ed," he said quietly, "will have to face me."

Murphy whistled softly. "Reckon that makes it pretty even, Ames," he grinned. "Three against three."

Ames thought this over. "It's just McLain and myself," he said.

"No," Murphy told him. "I heard Farrel Brown tellin' McLain ten minutes ago that he was backin' him against Mulvaney. Reckon that's why Jeff's got his gander up."

(Continued on page 88)

Arbitration At White Rock Spring

Link wheeled his bay mount so that its rump came hard against Turley, slamming him against the shack.

By MORGAN LEWIS

Sometimes it's easier to loan good rangeland to a skunkaroo cowman than it is to get him off that range! But Link Turner, who was a salty cowpoke, thought he had discovered a way . . .

"LINK, boy, you can't quit!" Duncan West said in a scandalized voice, and blew smoke through wide nostrils. "How'm I goin' to run this shebang an' stand up to Effie, without you back me up?" He pushed the lamp farther up the table and thus unobstructed peered at the long, limber young man across from

him. "You wouldn't go off an' leave a poor old man to the reformin' ways of Effie and Sheriff Pete Watson?"

"Poor old man, hell!" Link Turner said, with great conviction. He tipped back in his chair, and hung his thumbs in the pockets of his levis. "You're the toughest old coot ever to hit Montana. You've got the best ranch and the best cattle, but you didn't get 'em sittin' in a rocker while some tough gents tried to horn in on you."

He shoved red hair from his tanned forehead and regarded his employer with sober gray eyes. "I saw Effie and Sheriff Watson in town today. You let her take a hand in runnin' this place, like you been doin', and you'll wind up with an acre of land and no place to put it. What she needs is to have a paddle lifted from her rear end."

Old Man West winced at this last statement of his foreman's. "Mebbe you're right," he conceded grudgingly, tugging at his white moustache, "but I promised her maw I'd git her edjycated. I reckon I hadn't oughta sent her back east, but she wouldn't be so bad if that upliftin' lawman didn't keep proddin' her on."

LINK lit a cigarette and let smoke from his dribble nose. His impassive face gave no hint of the deep affection he felt for this grizzled old rancher who had taken him in, a stray, shivering waif. "Whatever the reason is," he said firmly, "she's playin' hob, and you're headed straight for trouble. I don't aim to ram-rod any outfit that sits on its hands and lets Bill Turley walk in and take range."

"What can I do?" Old Man West growled. "Effie owns her maw's half interest in the place. She told Turley he could use that White Rock Spring range for Summer graze. We don't need it now, an' he'll move out come Fall."

Smoke veiled Link's brown face. "And if he doesn't move out," he said quietly, "you're out on a limb. You shipped a lot of stuff last year when prices was high, but at the rate you're restockin' you're goin' to need that range, and need it bad. Without White Rock Spring, you're just another two-bit rancher without grass enough for his stock. You'll have to watch 'em starve, or sell 'em for what you can get."

Old Man West shifted uneasily in his chair, irritated at having his own fears confirmed. "Don't be so damn' gloomy," he snapped. "Effie didn't give him that range. Turley'll move out when we say the word."

Link lowered his chair and stretched his long legs with deceptive calm. "I'm right glad to know that," he said. "I was a mite worried when I saw that line shack goin' up, but if you're. . . ."

Old Man West leaned forward so suddenly his rheumatic elbow banged the table. "Damn! A line shack! Where?"

"Not more'n ten rod from the spring." Link reached for the old man's wrist, and stretched the ailing arm on the table. He massaged it with lean, brown fingers. "You don't hold patent rights to that land. If Turley once moves into that shack, you'll never get him out."

Old Man West screwed up his face as Link's fingers found the sore spot. "By Jasper," he gritted, "no two-bit saddlebum can put up a shack on my land. I'll go over there, come mornin', an' kick him an' his outfit off the place. . . . I'll show 'em who's boss 'round here. . . . I'll. . ." The words slowed up and his voice trailed off.

"What else you aim to do?" Link inquired guilelessly.

Lightning still played in the old man's glance, but caution showed in the lines about his mouth. "Well," he said cagily, "we don't want to go off half-cocked; mebbe Effie told him he could throw up a shack. We'll speak to her when she gits back an'. . . ."

Link released the arm and stood up. "You can talk to Effie," he said with finality, "I'll pack my warbag and be on my way in the morning."

"Now, Link!" The old man arose so abruptly he teetered the lamp. "Keep your shirt on." He peered up at his tall foreman. "Don't you like Effie no more? I remember when she used to tag you all

'round the place, an' you not much more'n a button. I thought for awhile you an' she would. . . ."

"That was a long time ago," Link interrupted bruskly, and some emotion roughened his face. "But that's not the point—I can't stand to be around when the ranch gets broken up."

Old Man West studied his red-headed foreman's stubborn jaw, and made a small motion of resignation. "What is it you want?"

"I want to take the boys over to the spring in the mornin'," Link said in a tough voice, "and clean out that bunch."

Old Man West gave him a look filled with foreboding. "Effie'll hit the ceilin' when she hears about it," he protested. "She wants things done in a civ'lized way.

"Let her," Link said shortly. "After it's done there's not much she can do about it."

The old man debated, but the sound of horses coming into the yard hastened his decision. "All right," he sighed. "I'll let you handle it, but don't, for God's sake, let that red-headed temper of your'n git the best of you!"

Horses trampled out in the yard and leather creaked. Link looked out, and turned to the old man. "Here's Effie now," he said swiftly. "You let me take care of Turley, and I'll handle it my own way—the way you taught me."

EFFIE WEST came into the room and the lamplight caught red tints in her mahogany-colored hair; it put warmth in her amazingly blue eyes, and showed the faint freckles dusted across her small brown nose. She looked at her father's bland and guileless face, and turned her glance sharply to Link. But he was nodding to the sheriff, who had followed her in.

Sheriff Peter Watson was a blond, heavy-built young man with a calm and judicious countenance. He said, "Hello, Turner," and turned his attention to Old Man West. "That's a fine attitude you showed about White Rock Spring," he said heartily.

"What at'tude?" Old Man West inquired cautiously.

"Why," the young sheriff said, "letting Turley and some of the small ranchers use your range for the Summer. That's cooperation and neighborliness. In the old days guns would have been used, and men would have died.

"Oh, that," Old Man West looked down at his rope scarred hands. "That was mainly Effie's doin's. Besides, the land ain't patented."

"Of course," Watson agreed, "the land is legally free, but it has been considered your range for years, and it is a fine thing to let those men use it. I'm sure Turley and his neighbors will show their appreciation."

"I'm sure they will," Old Man West murmured, and sank into a chair. "I'm expectin' a certif'cate of a'preciation from 'em any day."

Effie looked at young Watson's earnest, slightly puzzled face, and suppressed a giggle. She came up behind her father and ran slim fingers through his shock of white hair. "Dad's an old die-hard," she explained, "but he's beginning to see the light. It's time law and order came to Montana, and men stopped shooting each other over foolish range quarrels. Most trouble could be avoided if men would talk things over in a calm and sensible manner, or resort to arbitration."

She turned from her father and hung her jacket on a wall peg. Link noticed how the tailored whipcords fitted snugly about her slim hips, and quickly looked the other way. *It was something when girls took to wearin' pants.*

She came back to the table, touching fingers to her hair. "Would you like a cup of coffee, Pete?"

"No thanks," Watson said. "I'll have to get started for town." He paused at the door and looked back at Link. "Miss West's horse is outside." He smiled warmly at Effie, "I'll be over in the morning."

The door closed behind him, and Old

Man West choked on a lungful of smoke. "Damn," he muttered, "this terbaccy is pure meadow hay . . . . be sure you take care of Miss West's horse, Link."

Effie looked at her father's congested face and smiled. "Pete was back east for about eight years," she reminded him, "and he is a little out of touch. It does him great credit that he was elected sheriff."

"Him, or his old man's money," her father drawled. "It's lucky for Mrs. Watson's little boy that hoss thieves an' rustlers ain't thick as they was."

Link moved for the door. "Hard day tomorrow," he said. "Good night."

While he was putting up Effie's horse, thoughts of Old Man West came to trouble him. The way Old Man had been knuckling under to Effie seemed to indicate he was losing his grip. It would be a sad thing if his mind began to fail. He couldn't be more than sixty-five, Link reflected, but he had lived a mighty hard life. A year or so back, if Link had threatened to quit, the Old Man would have told him off in no uncertain manner. Now, he meekly submitted and let Link have his way. But then, a year ago it wouldn't have been necessary for Link to take his stand—the Old Man would have landed on Turley and his helpers like a ton of bricks.

Link washed up and went in to the bunkhouse with a feeling of heaviness within his chest.

LINK and his crew ate breakfast in the cookshack by lamplight. Night's chill was still in the air, and early morning glumness was in their faces. After hot coffee and food had worked their change, Link pushed back his chair and dragged out the makings. "Bill Turley and his bunch of two-bit ranchers are makin' a bid for White Rock Spring," he announced.

Interest spread around the table. "I coulda told you that would happen," Shorty Parsons remarked, "when you let 'em on our range."

Link nodded. "The boss thought different, but it didn't pan out. Bill Turley is puttin' up a line shack. We're goin' over and show him how wrong he is."

Curley Robinson clapped a hat onto his bald head and stood up. "Fine. When do we get started?"

Link grinned at him. "After awhile. First, we're sendin' Idaho out with the buckboard. You fellas give him a hand with the buckskins."

Idaho stood up on bowed legs, and his dark grizzled face looked tough. "Am I gittin' left outa the fun?" he demanded.

"Don't worry," Link reassured him. "You'll be in it with both feet."

"That's better," Idaho said, and went out with his short, rocking walk. The black-haired Lang brothers, Whitey and Dave, trailed after him.

Link set his glance upon the stocky Irishman by the stove. "Cookey," he ordered, "if Effie West wants to know where we've gone, you don't know. Understand?"

"Sure," Cookey assented, "but wouldn't it be better if I went along? Then I couldn't get into no trouble."

Link pondered the suggestion. "It's an idea," he assented. "Go catch yourself a horse." Cookey stripped off his apron and went out with a broad grin on his red, freckled face.

Cookey would make six, Link tallied. Seven, counting himself. Enough to handle Turley and his rag-tag crew. He went out into the gray morning and over to the corral. Inside, he dropped his loop over a big, raw-boned bay and cinched on a centerfire rig.

"All ready," Idaho said at his elbow.

Link took him aside and gave him certain instructions. After the buckboard had rattled off, he sat the roan out in the yard while the crew straggled out of the corral and the horses had their morning buck.

"Do we take the carbines?" Baldy wanted to know.

"Might's well, for luck," Link nodded.

Baldy disappeared and came back with two rifles. He handed one to link, who shoved it into the saddle boot, and gave the crew a slow, hard look. "There'll be no shootin' unless they take a crack at

Link set himself and brought a punch up from the grass tops.

you first, or I give the word. Understand that, Whitey and Dave?"

"You're the boss," White said, and Dave nodded.

"Let's go," Link said. He touched the bay in the flank and moved out of the yard at a slow trot. *Got to give Idaho time with the buckboard,* he thought.

THE sun had mounted into the sky and its Summer heat burned through Link's thin calico shirt. On either hand, the range lay flat and unbroken as far as a man could see. Ahead, Apache Ridge stretched its long swell across the plain with scrub pine and oak darkening its crest. Beyond it, the land dipped down into the flat range around White Rock Spring.

Link reined in and gave his orders. "Whitey, you and Dave drift off to the right and come down the ridge after I hit the spring.

"Baldy and Shorty, drift to the left and do the same. I'll keep Cookey with me." He faced his crew. "Remember what I said—no shootin' unless they jump you, or I give the word. If you find any hombres on the ridge, bring 'em along down. Get goin'!"

He eased sideways in the saddle and built a smoke, while the two pairs of riders loped for the ridge. He watched them reach it and slow down for the climb. Then, he kicked the bay into motion and rode straight ahead with Cookey beside him.

The cook was a heavy, chunky man and the heat punished him. Going up the ridge, sweat ran from him as though he were doing the climbing instead of the horse. It turned his blue shirt dark in patches and made it stick to his hide. When they reached the belt of pines, Baldy and Shorty were just disappearing into them on the left, and Whitey waved from farther along on the right.

Cookey fell back in the rear as Link warily threaded the bay through scrub growth. It was one thing for him to surprise the other outfit; but it would be something else again for them to get the jump on him. He came out onto flat ground at the summit and heard the sharp ring of axes off to his left. A hundred yards on, where the downslope began, the sound left off abruptly, and he heard voices. That would be Baldy and Shorty.

Link zig-zagged the bay down through the trees. Presently, he came clear of the lodgepole growth, and saw the shine of the rock that had given the spring its name. It lay a hundred rods from the foot of the slope, and the spring welled up from beneath it. Beyond, on the open range, cattle were feeding—Turley's cattle.

Between the rock and the slope, a shack was going up, built of green pine. That explained the sound of axes. There were four men working on it, and Link was halfway down the slope before they saw him.

Two of them were on the roof and two were putting up siding. The two on the roof came down in a hurry, and the four grouped together, watching Link and Cookey as they came off the slope and hit level ground. Beyond the shack was a wagon with its pole resting on the ground and a couple of bed rolls sticking out the back.

Link held the bay to a slow lope until he pulled up before the men. He swung the bay until he was sideways to them, and could look down into Bill Turley's warily watching eyes. Beside Turley there were Alsop, and Streeter, two-bit ranchers, and another man he did not know.

Cookey pulled up directly in front of Link, and facing him, so that the four men were boxed in between the horses and the shack.

Turley observed this and strain appeared in his face. "What you tryin' to pull, Turner?" he asked in a high, nasal voice. He was a long, hard slab of a man, with black hair straggling from under a battered hat. His boney, hooked nose twitched when he spoke.

LINK ignored the question. He sat his horse and looked the shack over, knowing the value of making the other man wait. "Nice little place you've got," he remarked at last. "Gettin' all fixed for Winter?"

Turley shuttled a glance at the men lined up with him, and back to Link. Angry color was seeping into his lined face. His lips parted, but only air came out.

"You got a deed to his land, Turley?"

"Don't need no deed," Turley said dog-

gedly. "This is free land. . . . besides, West said we could use it."

"If it's free land, why did you ask permission?" Link asked softly. "Why didn't you just walk in and take over?"

Turley shifted his feet and anger grew in his face, and uncertainty. He wasn't sure how strong Link was or just what he intended to do.

Link had been taking his time, holding off action until the boys could get down the ridge. Now, he lifted his head and saw the Lang brothers cutting downslope. He turned back to Turley. "I'll tell you why," he said. "West said you could use this range, and you figured he was gettin' soft; that Quarter Circle W was ripe for breakin' up. So you decided to nail down this strip for yourself. You got some rawhiders behind you and you figured you were strong." He left his eye rove over the four men and saw strain building up in them. "Well, your judgment was poor," he said flatly. "Your string is played out, Turley. Get your outfit together and get out!"

Turley looked at Link and licked his lips. This was the showdown he had half hoped to avoid, until he was better entrenched. Now, he had either to crawl, and give up all hope of ever possessing this range, or fight. Turley weighed his chances and made his decision. He took a half-step backward and his hand moved for his hip.

Link had been watching for this break in the man's temper. Now, he wheeled the bay so that its rump came hard against Turley, slamming him against the shack's wall. Alsop and Streeter backed hurriedly from the bay's feet, taken off guard by the swift action. But the fourth man had smelled smoke before. His gun was half out of his holster when Cookey laid a gun barrel over his head.

Turley was cursing in a bitter, choked voice, trying to get his gun arm free.

Link pulled his gun while Alsop and Streeter were making up their minds about getting into the fight. He backed the bay away from Turley, and kept him covered.

The man Cookey had hit was down on hands and knees, slowly shaking his head to clear it. Cookey's gun, gripped in a big red fist, was covering Alsop and Streeter.

Bitter rage twisted Turley's dark face, but his hand came away from his hip. "That's better," Link said. "Keep your hand away from your gun!" He stepped from the bay, dropping the reins to leave him ground-hitched. "Cookey," he ordered, "go around behind these gents and collect their hardware!"

Cookey dropped from his horse. His Irish face wore a look of wicked enjoyment as he moved behind the men, jerking loose their guns. When he came to Turley, the man's arm twitched, but he made no other move. "We ain't through yet," he told Link, bitterly.

Cookey went back to his horse, and from around each corner of the shack softly stepped a Lang brother. "Thought it might be best to take 'em from the rear," Whitey explained. He looked beyond Link and grinned. "Looks like Shorty an' Curley made a haul."

Link turned and saw the two Quarter Circle W riders herding two men on foot down the slope. He turned back to Turley. "I reckon that takes care of the rest of your outfit."

Just then, Whitey gave a low whistle. "Uh-uh, here comes trouble."

LINK'S head snapped around, and he knew Whitey was right. Two riders had just come down onto the flat and their ponies were beating the dust from the grass as they headed for the shack. Link recognized Effie and the sheriff. Beyound them, he could see a dust cloud that would be Idaho, coming with the buckboard.

Link holstered his gun. He was rolling a smoke when Effie slid her mare to a stop before him. The sheriff arrived somewhat later. Effie's blue eyes were blazing. "Link Turner," she demanded, "just what do you think you're doing?"

Link turned a smoothly impassive face to her. "It ought to be pretty plain," he

said pleasantly. "I'm throwin' a bunch of buzzards off the place."

"You've no right to do it," Effie said hotly. "I told Bill Turley he could use this strip for Summer graze."

At this unexpected championing, the strain left Turley's face and a pleased grin spread over it. "That's what I told him, ma'am," he exclaimed self righteously, "but he wouldn't listen. Come ridin' in here, and ordered me off."

"Shut your mouth, Turley," Link said succinctly. He turned his back on him and faced Effie. "I'm doin' this with your dad's say-so. Don't be fooled into thinkin' Turley just wants this for Summer range. Look at that shack and the men he's got with him. Once you let him move in, he'll stick tighter than a burr to a cow's tail."

Effie looked at the shack as though just then seeing it. An expression of uncertainty flitted across her tanned face. "Are you sure, Link?"

Link motioned to Turley. "Ask him."

Effie dismounted and glanced dubiously at the men lined up by the shack, and at the two Turley and Shorty had just deposited nearby. "Is that true, Turley? Do you intend to stay?"

Turley was confident that no violence would take place with Effie around, and the presence of the sheriff emboldened him. "Why not?" he asked impudently. "This here is free range. Just because your old man hogged it for years don't make it his."

Effie gasped. "Why, the idea! Such ingratitude, and after I let you use the range this Summer! You certainly can't have this range, but things will be done in a peaceful and legal manner. Pete, put these men off our land!"

Mr. Watson's heavy blond face was openly troubled as he dismounted. "I can't do it, legally, Effie," he said worriedly. "You know this land isn't patented, and, technically, it is free until someone files a homestead claim on it. . . ."

Effie's blue eyes snapped. "That's ridiculous, and you know it! This land has been ours ever since I can remember!" She rammed both hands into the pockets of her nicely fitted breeches and stood before him, feet wide-spaced. "Don't stand there talking foolishness—put them off!"

In that pose, she reminded Link of Old Man West in his prime, when it had taken a good man to stand up to him.

The sheriff ran a finger inside his shirt collar. "Be reasonable, Effie. There are no legal grounds for arresting them. You said, just last night, that law and order had come to Montana . . . why not try some form of arbitration with Turley?"

"You're sure makin' progress," Link drawled. "Half the ranch ain't patented. Why not make Turley a present of it along with this? You couldn't run so many head but you might make out. Maybe. . ."

Turley had been listening and had formed his own private judgment. He turned to his men. "Come on," he said brashly. "They can't do nothin'. I told you this was free range."

Effie gazed at the sheriff in cold and helpless anger.

"Go on," Link urged, "arbitrate. This is your chance to work things out nice and peaceful."

TURLEY was moving toward the shack. "Wait! Effie called in desperation. "You can't do this . . . maybe we can come to some arrangement!"

"I'm afraid not, ma'am. You heard the sheriff say this was free land."

Link stepped over to Whitey and spoke softly into the waddie's ear. The buckboard rattled to a stop beyond the shack and Idaho stuck his grizzled head around the corner. "All set, Link?"

Link nodded. "Get to work." He strode past Effie. "You've fooled around with this trash long enough. I've got a way of handlin' this that's got arbitration beat four ways from Sunday."

"Link!" Effie said, in hurried alarm. "No violence! I absolutely forbid any fighting!"

Link went on past and came up with Turley. "So you're stayin' are you?" he said levelly, and hit him in the face. From the corner of his eye, he observed Idaho lugging a five gallon can of coal oil into the shack.

Turley's head snapped back. The grin was wiped from his bony face and he came in with both fists swinging.

"Pete!" Effie screamed. "Do something!"

Link side-stepped Turley's rush and moved around him, hitting for the face. Turley was the kind of man who had to have respect for other peoples' property hammered into him, and Link intended to do a good job.

Young Peter Watson shifted his feet indecisively. If he helped Turley, he would be aiding him in taking land from another man; the same thing held true if he helped Link. It was a nice question, considering that the land was free. On the other hand, as sheriff, it was certainly his duty to stop a fight.

"Stop them, Pete," Effie gasped, "or I will!" The question was nicely decided for him as Whitey and Dave Lang rode their active cowponies in front of him and Effie, blocking them from the fight.

Then Bill Turley engaged Link's attention almost exclusively. The man was clumsy but strong as an ox. Link sidesteped most of the blows or took them on his arms, but once, Turley's big fist took him alongside the head with force enough to make his teeth rattle.

Link clinched and hung on until his head cleared. Over Turley's shoulder he saw Idaho pause at the door of the shack and throw a match inside, and then run. The oil took hold with a mighty puff of flame, and burned with a soft roar.

Link broke clear of Turley and got in a smash to the jaw that drove the man backward. He followed it up, driving in blows to the stomach, where they hurt. Turley fought back with great roundhouse swings, but the body attack had taken his steam. Link's fists hammered him back, past his tight-lipped, unarmed backers, past the blazing shack, until he was close to the supply wagon.

Link set himself and brought up one from the grass tops. Turley's heels slammed against the wagon tongue and he spilled over it. He sprawled on the ground, making no move to arise.

Link stepped back. "You can load him in the wagon," he told Turley's followers, "and get him out of here." He wiped his battered knuckles on his levis.

THE fight had left an unpleasant taste in his mouth. He surveyed Effie and the sheriff in grim silence as the Lang brothers moved their ponies. "You two certainly messed things up," he remarked caustically. He turned to watch the shack building-crew gather their horses and equipment and depart in silence, with Turley's legs hanging limply over the tailboard.

"You're fired, Link Turner!" Effie's voice said furiously. "You're a cruel, savage brute!" She came around in front of him and her small palm took him squarely across the face.

Link's gray eyes went icy, as his still smouldering temper flamed. He grabbed the girl by her shoulders and sat down, pulling her across his knees. He applied his palm, hard, on the spot where her breeches fitted the tightest. His hand was raised when something hard rapped him on the head, and the world dissolved in a maze of shooting sparks.

LINK was interested in a falling star that didn't fall, but kept spinning and spinning before his eyes, and growing hotter and hotter. He opened his eyes, and discovered the sun was shining straight down his upturned face, and his head was resting on Effie's lap. Her silk blouse partly shaded his face and it kept moving as Effie expressed herself to Mr. Peter Watson in no uncertain terms.

"Hitting a man from behind," she was saying. "No one but a coward would do that."

"That's the way he was hitting you," the sheriff said defensively.

"It makes no difference," Effie said hotly. "Anyone who would sneak up behind a man and hit him over the head with a revolver is a yellow-bellied—buzzard." She brought out the last word triumphantly. "And you'd better make tracks for town,"

(Continued on page 90)

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

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TRIAL BY FIRE

"Don't play cards with Mike Cameron tonight!" the girl warned Dave. But what did she mean? What was her game? Everything about the girl was, to Dave, a maze of contradictions

Against her will he lifted her and swung her over the side of the burning packet.

THE excitement in young Dave Murdock was a pressure built up by an increasing number of things. Less than a month ago, he had been leading a pleasant but useless life back in staid Boston. Now, watching the fading sunset from the Texas deck of a river packet, he was reaching out into a new world and toward a new life. Although he was a johnny-come-lately and the frontier now was far beyond the Missouri, the fever of high adventure possessed him and he was as eager as a small boy on his way to the circus.

"Mark three," the leadsman sang out. And again: "Mark four!"

The flat-bottomed, stern-wheeled *Western Belle* was sounding her way through shoal waters. Her whistle gave a raucous blast, warning a clumsy barge ahead to stay clear of the channel. Old Muddy was bustling with traffic these days, all the way from St. Louis to Westport. The *Western Belle,* churning up the mud-yellow waters with her paddle wheel, was crowded with passengers and a great miscellany of freight. She was so crowded it seemed to Dave Murdock that all the world must be traveling west, to Texas and Santa Fe and California. There *was* a great migration, and he was glad to be a part of it.

The sun was gone now, leaving only soft streaks of color in the sky. The Missouri took on a dark, murky look that was relieved only by the splashes of yellow light from the packet's lamps. Looking down from the Texas, or upper, deck, Dave Murdock could see the lower deck, piled with cargo and teeming with emi-

grants—the poorer folk who made the long trip in the open, fair weather or foul, sleeping and eating and waiting without shelter. Upon fires built in open sheet-iron stoves, they now prepared their evening meal. Dave Murdock, with money in his pocket, would dine in the comfortable salon. . . . A quick step sounded behind him. A clear, almost musical voice said, "A penny for your thoughts, David."

Dave turned and smiled upon the girl who came toward him across the deck. She was a tall girl fashionably dressed. She moved with grace in her dark blue velvet dress, and she carried herself in that proud way of a woman who knows she is attractive. She was not, perhaps, as young as a lingering bloom of youth made her appear; nor, perhaps, were her clear gray eyes so lacking in worldly wisdom as a young man might think. But Dave Murdock thought of none of that, reaching out his hand to Joyce Shelby. Her presence made him feel rather than think, for Joyce Shelby was one of the causes of the excitement he had known ever since St. Louis.

"I was thinking of you," he said. "I was wishing you'd find me here."

SHE faced the wind, let it tousle her golden hair; she drew a deep breath that lifted her breast high. She seemed, like Dave himself, to be sampling the fine feel of adventure. She had told him that this was her first trip up the Missouri, that she was from New Orleans—a city, now that the war was ended, under the military heel of the Union Army—and headed for Westport where she would join her sister. She swung back, faced Dave, her smile fading.

"It is nice, up here, away from the crowd," she said.

She paused and her face clouded. A shadow filled her eyes, and that was a thing Dave Murdock had noticed in her before. It was like a trace of unhappiness, a glimpse of secret trouble. "But it is not all good, this trip," she went on. "David, will you promise me something?"

He was young, he was male, and Joyce Shelby was a beautiful woman. He said impulsively, "Anything, Joyce — anything."

Her smile came back, and she seemed vastly relieved. "Don't play cards with Mike Cameron tonight," she said. She touched his arm, almost coquettishly. "Remember, you promised."

She turned abruptly away, moving along deck, and Dave stared after her in surprise. He did not understand. He needed an explanation. He called, "Joyce —one minute," and went after her. She halted and faced him on the companionway that led to the lower decks, saying, "Yes?"

"Why did you want me to promise that?" he demanded. "Mike Cameron is a friend of yours. You introduced him to me, back in St. Louis, as a gentleman friend of your family." He shook his head, bewildered. "Now you warn me against him, as though he were a tinhorn gambler."

Once again the shadow was in her eyes. She said softly, "David, you promised . . . . Do as I asked, please."

She turned and went below, vanishing from Dave's sight. He stood there in uncertainty, gripped by suspicions that made him wince with guilt. Being young, having lived something of a sheltered life, he could take people only at their face value. He had met Joyce Shelby in a restaurant in St. Louis, and he had fallen in love with her. She was different from the girls he had known back East; he had admired her courage in traveling alone, and he never had known a girl so gay and friendly. Yet now, after introducing him to Mike Cameron and saying that they two must be friends, she was warning him against the man. If Mike Cameron was other than he seemed, why did Joyce call him "friend?" If he was a tinhorn, a blackleg, how was it she knew him at all?

So Dave Murdock's thoughts suddenly ran, filling him with doubt. The *Western Belle's* whistle sounded again, loud against the night quiet. Great black clouds of smoke poured from her high stack. The deck timbers quivered under the steady throb of her engine. There

Sickened, battered, he staggered to the door, leaving the other man lying there.

was no moon, and darkness shrouded Old Muddy's shores. The night air was warm, but Dave Murdock shivered—not knowing why.

THE cabin-deck passengers dined in the well-appointed salon, served by dusky waiters wearing white jackets. Dave Murdock sat at a table with a dozen other people, all of them men except for Joyce Shelby and an Army officer's wife and young daughter. Joyce sat on the opposite side of the table, but at its far end, and Dave had no chance to talk with her. But she looked his way often, not smilingly but with an unspoken plea in her eyes, and Dave knew that she was begging him to keep his impulsively made promise.

"Don't play cards with Mike Cameron tonight!"

Mike Cameron came in late, taking the one remaining chair at that same table. He was a tall dark man with a flashing smile and a reckless look in his black eyes.

He was a dude in his dress, wearing a beaver hat, a long black coat over a patterned vest, and plaid California jeans. He wore a diamond in his tie, a cameo ring on his left hand. . . . His hands were long and slim, the fingers deft. Gambler's hands? Yes; somehow, Dave Murdock was sure of Mike Cameron's profession. Riverboat gambler, a man who lived by a deck of cards.

Joyce caught his eye, her gaze again pleading with him.

She wanted to save him from a fleecing; that was clear. She did not want him to end this trip penniless. Dave had told her, confiding in her as a man will to one certain woman, that he had two thousand dollars—a grubstake for his fresh start in Texas. The two thousand was all that was left of the once sizable Murdock fortune, for Dave's father, who recently had passed away, had made some bad investments. With his stake, he meant to go into ranching in the Staked Plains. He had told Joyce of his plans, his high hopes, because he wished she would share them with him. Now she had warned him against Mike Cameron, to safeguard his grubstake. Dave was grateful, of course, but he could not stop wondering how it was that Mike Cameron and Joyce Shelby were friends.

The evening meal was soon ended, and people drifted from the salon. Joyce rose and walked away with the Army officer's wife and daughter. Mike Cameron stopped Dave as he too was about to go onto deck, and he said, "We'll have our friendly poker game here, as soon as the salon is cleared."

Dave said, "I'm not sitting in, Cameron."

Cameron's dark face tightened up a little. "Why not, friend?"

"Call it a change of mind."

"A strange thing," said Cameron. A heavy gold watch chain was draped from pocket to pocket of his flowered vest, and now, lifting his right hand, his fingers toyed with it. "You have a reason, no doubt."

"Do I need one?" Dave said.

The tightness in Cameron's dark face was more marked, but he attempted to smile in friendly fashion. "It's just that a refusal to sit in on a game, after a promise to sit in," he said, "seems like an insult." He waved a hand toward four men standing in a group across the room. "I might not be offended, Murdock; but the others may take your withdrawal unpleasantly."

"My apologies to them," Dave said. "But my withdrawal has nothing to do with those four men. You understand, Cameron?"

He swung on his heel, meaning to leave the salon, but Cameron caught hold of his arm with a viselike grip and help him. Dave turned back, throwing off the gambler's hand. He knew that he had made an enemy. Cameron's face was unreadable, except for that dark tightness, but his eyes smouldered with the rage working in him.

"Murdock," he muttered, "say what you're thinking!"

"All right, Cameron; you've asked for it." Dave was gripped by a sudden anger of his own. "I've been warned against you. You're a professional gambler, and I'm a greenhorn with a poke." He shook his head, adding, "I know as well as you that a fool and his money are soon parted. I'm not playing the fool."

Cameron's eyes narrowed down, were now more thoughtful than enraged. He said, "Who warned you against me, Murdock?"

"That's something I'll not tell you."

"No need," said Cameron. "It was Joyce Shelby."

Cameron turned away, crossing the room to the four waiting men. He was smiling, in his artificial gambler's way, as he greeted them. But Dave Murdock could see that Mike Cameron was in an ugly humor that would stay with him. He turned and saw the Army officer, a Captain Grierson, standing nearby smoking a cigar. The officer said, "A smart decision you made, Murdock. Cameron would have fleeced you clean."

They walked onto deck together. Dave saw Joyce chatting with Mrs. Grierson and her daughter farther along the deck.

The officer said, "Mike Cameron has been working these river boats a long time. You're one of the few with sense enough not to be led to the slaughter."

Grierson paused, studied the burning end of his cigar.

"A strange thing," he finally went on. "Mike Cameron is a decent sort, in other ways. I've known him for years, and I like him. But he and the lady—" He was looking toward Joyce Shelby now.

Dave felt a sudden chill within himself. "What about the lady?"

"Miss Shelby works with Cameron," said Captain Grierson. "She's his come-on. . . . If Cameron were a pitchman peddling shoddy wares, she'd be called his shill. You understand, Murdock? Miss Shelby picks out likely-looking victims, becomes acquainted with them, then—if she learns the victim really has a poke—introduces him to Cameron."

Dave was jolted. He did not want to believe such a thing, yet he knew that Captain Grierson would not lie about so important a thing. As the officer nodded and moved off to join his wife and daughter, Dave felt a chill emptiness grow in himself. Joyce Shelby was not what she seemed, not what she claimed. She was Mike Cameron's partner in a tinhorn game. She might even be Mike Cameron's woman!

THE *Western Belle* raced through the night, its great paddle wheel churning up the muddy waters of the Missouri. Smoke and showers of sparks poured from her stack as her boilers strained for more and more speed. Every trip was an attempt to break speed records, for the fastest packet could claim the most profitable cargoes and charge the highest passenger rates. The *Western Belle's* skipper was staking his skill and his knowledge of the treacherous river to make the trip in the shortest possible time. Danger? There was always danger snapping at the heels of a river packet!

But among the passengers, there was gaiety and fun-making. The music of fiddle and guitar rose from the cargo deck, and a square dance was being held. Laughter and loud talk was pleasant in the night. But Dave Murdock stood alone thinking his bleak thoughts. The excitement was gone from him, and he no longer felt that this trip was high adventure. He did not want to think of Joyce Shelby, but he could not help himself. He now knew what she was, yet he did not want to believe it. He wanted to believe she was good, the woman he had thought her to be.

"Damn Mike Cameron," he muttered, half aloud.

He blamed the gambler for what Joyce Shelby was.

He saw her coming along deck toward him, and he hardened his heart. She was lovely, and the picture she made almost shattered his resolve not to have more to do with her.

She said, "You kept your promise, David. That is good."

"Mike Cameron," he said flatly, "will not thank you."

There was a flash of fear in her eyes. "You told him?"

"He guessed that you had warned me against him," Dave said, choking on his bitterness. "Someone else told me the truth about you and him. You're his partner. You help him in his tinhorn game."

"Yes," she admitted. "But Mike is no tinhorn gambler. He deals an honest game. It is only that he is too clever a card player for any amateur to win from him. Don't take this so hard, David. I set out to help Mike get you into a game, but when I got really to know you. . . . Oh, don't you see? Most men play and lose and do not care, but you would have lost all—your grubstake, your plans. I couldn't let it happen. I begged Mike not to let you sit in, but he merely laughed. . . ."

Her voice trailed away, and that shadow of trouble or unhappiness was there in her eyes once more. "Forget us, David," she said. "When you step off this boat at Westport, don't think of Mike Cameron and Joyce Shelby again." She forced a wry smile. "And David, don't trust people so much."

She turned and walked away, her head

bowed. To David, she looked downright unhappy. He cursed Mike Cameron again, understanding now that Joyce was in love with the gambler and that he made use of her love. Mike Cameron had dragged a good woman down to his level, and his real love was a deck of cards.

DAVE went to his cabin, a cramped room he had shared with a drummer headed for the Texas cow towns. The drummer was one of the men sitting in on Mike Cameron's game, so Dave now had the cabin to himself. He removed his hat and coat, stretched out on his bunk, and stared at the blank ceiling—his thoughts dull and confused. Having lost Joyce—rather, never having won her—his plans for the future seemed suddenly pointless. It was no pleasure for a man to plan alone.

From outside came the mingled sounds of music and gay voices, the constant noise of the packet's straining engine. A knock sounded at the door, and Mike Cameron's voice said: "Murdock, I want a word with you."

He entered uninvited, and Dave swung down from his bunk and reached for his coat. Dave saw the dark tight look on the gambler's face, and he knew that Cameron was still in an ugly mood. Dave thought: *"He's thinking of my poke, and he's mean because it's slipped through his greedy fingers."*

But Cameron said, "I've talked with Joyce, and now I know why she warned you against sitting in on my game. You're in love with her, Murdock—like a stupid greenhorn, you're in love with the first woman that smiled on you." His face and his voice hardened. "Yeah! And she thinks she's in love with you, greenhorn! That's why she turned against me. She's throwing me over for you!"

Hope leaped alive in Dave Murdock. He said, "You've got no claim on her, Cameron. She's not married to you!"

Cameron laughed, hollowly. "You're right. I kept promising her that we'd make just one more trip, just one more killing. Kid, you were to have been that last killing. I told her in St. Louis that if your poke was big enough, she and I would quit the river for good—once I had your money in my belt!"

"You want to say anything more, Cameron?"

"Yeah—plenty more," Cameron said, and swore. "I'm warning you, Murdock—keep away from her. She's not leaving this boat with you. She's not your kind. Go get yourself a woman who hasn't knocked about the river and boom camps, and paid her way by flirting with all kinds of men. Sure I dragged her down, but she did it willingly. She made herself what she is—"

Dave could take no more of such talk. His rage had been building up to the explosive point. He lunged at Mike Cameron, drove his fist into the gambler's face. Cameron reeled back, slammed against the bulkhead. He muttered an oath, reached inside his coat, drew a derringer. Dave Murdock knew that the life would be blown out of him if Cameron got that gun leveled, so he jumped forward and grabbed at the weapon. They struggled back and forth in the small room, straining against one another, but Mike Cameron was no match for Dave Murdock's young strength. Dave finally wrenched the derringer from the gambler's hand. As Cameron grappled with him, he struck down with the gun as with a club. It was a terrific blow that caught Cameron at the base of the skull, and he dropped in a sprawling heap without a sound.

Sickened, battered from Cameron's blows, Dave dropped the derringer and stumbled to the door. He flung it open, lurched out into the passageway. The door swung closed behind him of its own volition. He moved along the passage, wanting to reach the deck and the fresh air. But before he reached deck, disaster struck the *Western Belle.*

NO MAN ever knew just what set off the conflagration. A wind carried spark from the smokestack may have touched off the blaze. Some careless member of the crew may have dropped a quirly butt or the embers from his pipe

among the cargo beneath deck. . . . One moment, the river packet was a secure haven. The next moment, it was a holocaust.

"Fire!"

The wild scream came from one man's throat. It was picked up and shrieked the length and breadth of the *Western Belle*. The first glimpe of flame was aft, about a cargo hatch, and merely a snaky tendril of fire. The wind snatched at that tendril, lifted and carried it, and almost before a person could think, the whole after part of the wooden craft was engulfed. Screaming passengers stampeded forward, away from the flames and smoke and blast of heat. Crew members came running to man the hand pumps, but the feeble streams of water could not stop those unrushing flames.

The skipper had his helmsman swing the packet about, so that it headed into the wind—in the vain hope that the gale would slow the fire in its spread forward. But he must have known his ship was doomed. A minute later, he was ordering the *Western Belle* steered for shore.

Dave Murdock came staggering onto deck, and the night was full of fire and crazily milling people. The flames raced along the port side like a red tidal wave. Choking smoke and showering sparks wafted over the boat. The paddle wheel was still turning, but now the packet ran aground on a sand bar—a hundred feet or more from shore. And the *Western Belle* was trapped.

The roar of the flames, the explosive crackling of the burning timbers, and the screams and howls of people created an unholy din. Wild-eyed, soot-blackened men ran first one way and then another. Women and children were being lowered over the side to the packet's one boat, already launched over the starboard side. Other people were leaping from the decks, some to drown, all driven by panic. Dave Murdock gave a hand with one of the pumps, working until the flames crowded close. He moved through the milling throng on the still-secure starboard side, then, and saw Joyce Shelby. She was the only woman left on the boat, and men were shouting for her to go over the side. She seemed not to hear them.

Dave reached her, caught her by the arms. "Joyce, can't you swim?"

She nodded, not speaking, her fear-filled eyes searching for something, someone, beyond him. He drew her to the rail, and he would have lifted and dropped her overboard had she not struggled against him.

"I can't go without him," she cried. "I can't go without Mike!"

SHE was hysterical, and Dave knew that all this time she had been hunting for Mike Cameron instead of saving herself. The love she kept for Mike Cameron was there for him to see. Dave Murdock winced under the hurt of that. And then, knowing panic himself, he realized why Joyce had not been able to find Mike Cameron. The gambler lay unconscious from that blow he, Dave Murdock, had struck him.

He said, "I'll hunt for Mike. You swim ashore."

He lifted her against her will, against her cry: "No, I won't go—Mike wouldn't go without me. He and I—"

Dave swung her over the railing. He dropped her, shouting, "Swim, Joyce—swim!" And saw the water catch her.

It rained sparks that fired whatever they touched. The wind blew not only the roaring blaze but flung about burning pieces of timber. The deck cargo was aglow, and something, perhaps gun cartridges, exploded among it. Smoke hung blackly over the scene, like a death pall, and through it could occasionally be seen the sky painted an eerie red.

Dave Murdock fought and shoved his way through men crowding forward for the jump overboard. He reached the passageway to the cabins, ignored someone's shout to come back. The passageway was smoke-filled and oven-hot, and he choked as he plunged into it. It seemed an eternity, the time it took him to reach the room he had occupied. Fear was in him, and he had to fight an impulse to turn and run. He flung open the door and

(Continued on page 92)

It was Link's say-so, but he was determined to make it stick. In the case of a forest fire, his boss's daughter was something to be considered

LINK TRAMLIN paused momentarily at the edge of the blackened timber area and listened to the steady growing sound in the night air.

Behind him, and from the fire, he was conscious of a far-off roar like that of a distant waterfall and he knew it was a thousand acres of flames sweeping through the crown of the forest, but it was a deeper, more subtle note that stopped him. Back in the timber he hadn't caught it, now he did. It was a quick, high-pitched shifting in the vibrations of the wind, as it trembled the fire-scarred trees, and the paper-crumpling sound was dead, flame-chewed branches ripping free and being wind-whipped to the ground.

He swung a quick glance back at the

All around was the heavy, ominous roar of the fire.

Blaze At High Rock

By HAROLD ROGERS

region from which he had just come, then stepped out into the circle of light from the cook's fire. The scrape of his boots against a rock brought a look of solid relief from a smoke-grimed man as he straightened up from a contour map he had been marking.

"It's been lightning ever since sundown. Back here away from the fire you can see it," the mapper said hopefully.

Tramlin threw him a tight smile and poured himself a cup of coffee from the kettle hanging over the fire. Sixty hours on the fire line was making Johnny Blondo, his assistant forester, grab at straws. Johnny was a relentless fighter, but he was out on his feet.

Link pushed his big, felt hat back on his coal-black hair and glanced around at the sleeping men on the ground. A few of them had taken off their boots, but for the most part they slept just as they had come back from the fire, when the relief crews took over.

For Link Tramlin there had been no relief. The preceding day he had managed to grab three hours of sleep in the back of a truck, that was all. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man just turned thirty, but tonight there were lines in his tanned face and his eyes, that ordinarily were a mixture of violet and powder-gray, were almost as black as his hair.

HE STARED up through the fire-scarred trunks in a vain attempt to pierce the smoke-obscured, night sky, then back at his assistant. "Dry lightning," he commented finally. "There isn't a hat full of rain in a hundred square miles of that."

Blondo squatted back on his heels and loaded his pipe. "Probably not." His voice was thick with weariness and his clothes were as fire-stained as his face. He paused with a lighted match cupped in his hand. "Gus Runkle was here looking for you about three-quarters of an hour ago. He's hotter than a two-bit pistol."

Tramlin's eyes squeezed in at the corners. More trouble. It was always the same in every commercial company, the endless fight between the logging chief and the company forester. The one, the logger thinking and talking in terms of cold dollars and cents for the immediate present. The other, the forester, building for the infinite future, with more times than not the logging chief getting his way because he could back his demands with visible columns of grim statistics. For a long time now things had been building up between Runkle and him. "What's he want?" Link asked flatly.

"Hell!" Johnny grunted. "When did that bird ever bother to tell anyone what he wants? He just moves in and takes it."

A thin smile softened the corners of Link Tramlin's hard mouth. Johnny Blondo, eastern-bred, western-trained, had gone through the forestry college at Missoula the same as he had, only later. There he had played football and boxed and during the summers he had worked as a lookout in an Idaho forest. Then with graduation Link Tramlin had selected him for an assistant and Link had never had reason to regret his choice.

In a rugged sort of way Johnny Blondo was a good-looking scamp with the crooked nose of a fighter and a big, laughing mouth that went with blue eyes and rough, curly, brown hair. He finished lighting his pipe. "I could have dropped a tree on him yesterday. Maybe I made a mistake when I didn't." He looked up with a frank, questioning gaze and thoughtfully blew a thin wisp of smoke through his teeth. "Why don't we pull out?" he asked suddenly, "go with the government service? If damn fools like Runkle want to log themselves out of business that's their headache."

LINK TRAMLIN shook his head and ran blunt fingers over a stubble that lay like iron filings along the square angle of his jaw. "Logging is my business," he said slowly. "My father and my grand father were loggers before me. They ruined more in a year by their ruthless method of stripping everything clean than I can rebuild in ten. The government service is fine, but someone who knows both angles, logging and forestry, has to teach these private companies—"

Johnny snorted, "You aren't figuring on teaching Runkle anything are you?"

"There's more to the High Rock Company than Runkle," Link answered and there was a ragged edge to his voice.

"Sure." Johnny's teeth clicked on his

Before that blaze nothing could stand still.

pipe stem. "Old White Whiskers Comstock is the big stick, but right now Gus Runkle is his fair-haired boy with plenty of nice, black figures in the profit column to back him and what the hell are we going to do about it?"

Before Link could frame an answer there was the quick drum of hurrying feet and Red Lasher, one of the company's woods bosses, stormed up to the fire.

"I quit," he snarled. "Now!"

Link eyed him coolly. Lasher was a good man. He knew men and he knew timber. "What's sandpapering your neck this time?" Link asked.

"Plenty," the burly logger was breathing hard through clenched teeth. He had a heavy mustache, a shade redder than his hair. Part of it had been recently burned away, the rest was bristling like porcupine quills. "I'm not taking men and equipment down into the Horseshoe tonight. The way the wind is shifting it will be an inferno down there before we have a chance."

"Back up and keep your tail down," Link told him. "No one is going down into that place tonight."

Red Lasher wiped his mouth with the back of a fingerless left hand. "That's only your say-so. Runkle left word for me to take the pumper and a crew and get down in there. Maybe you don't know it, but lately Gus Runkle has been running the High Rock. I couldn't find him so I found you and I'm telling you I quit."

"All right you quit!" The words came dull and hard through the darkness and were punctuated by the slamming of a car door. "There are plenty of younger men who aren't afraid who are ready to push a crew. Now get out!"

"Not until I get my money," Lasher said doggedly, but his big round face was wide open with surprise. "I've been with this company a long time—"

THE MAN ignored the old logger and shoved forward. He was slightly taller than Tramlin, heavier of chest and shoulder than the burly Lasher. He wore a gray tweed suit with a fresh blue gabardine shirt and a deeper blue tie. His small dark eyes pin-pointed Tramlin. "So you finally got back?"

Tramlin shifted slightly and unconsciously his right fist closed. "Evening, Runkle," he said.

Runkle jerked a mangled cigar from his thick-lipped mouth. "Who in hell ever told you how to fight a fire?" he roared.

"I took six easy lessons by mail," Tramlin replied. "Someday I'll read the same book you did, then I'll be an expert."

Runkle's lips twitched. "We're losing time and the company has a quarter of

a million feet of the best spruce in the state down there in Horseshoe Canyon. I want a pumper down there and a crew to start swamping out a line and backfiring."

"Not tonight," Tramlin said quietly. "With this wind veering around the way it is fifteen minutes of stiff blow from the wrong direction and they'd be trapped without a chance of getting out. Last Summer I wanted to build a road down in there and throw in a fire break. You said there'd be time enough to build a road when we started to log the place."

Runkle waved a big hand. "I'm not here to build a park. My job is to get logs out and show a profit."

"We're really showing one, now," Tramlin said. It was his opportunity to cram some hard facts down the chief logger's throat and he intended to do it.

He remembered Runkle from way back. Runkle had started to forestry college the same time he had, but at the end of the first year, when the men went out on practical work, Runkle had shifted to business administration and had finally dropped out of school entirely. Before coming with the High Rock Company he had worked for a half dozen outfits, but each change had been a kick upstairs. Tramlin had to give the man credit. He knew how to build himself up.

Tramlin saw Johnny Blondo stand up and look past them over toward the station wagon Runkle had driven into the headquarters camp. Then he too was looking. A girl was coming forward around the front end of the car. Up until then he had thought that Runkle was alone, now he realized that he had been mistaken.

Runkle saw their shift of attention and turned. "My very good friend, Miss Comstock," he said quickly. "She wanted to see the fire close-up. Now that it's quieting down I felt it quite safe for her to come."

"Better take her out," Tramlin contradicted flatly. "This thing is liable to blow anytime. We're packed ready to move in a hurry if it does."

LINK had heard of Old White Whiskers daughter before, but this was the first time he had ever seen her. She was usually back east. Now he saw her hesitate uncertainly at his words then she came forward with her yellow head held high to stand at Runkle's shoulder. There was a hint of high-handedness in her bearing, a daring challenge to authority. Yet she was an attractive girl, who could change her temper with her eyes. In the darkness Link couldn't tell if they were blue or black, but they had a calm, swift way of appraising a man. She opened her lips to speak, but Runkle cut her off.

"Jumpy as ever, Tramlin, when you're faced with facts. That's the way with you forestry fellows—"

"About that road," Link said quietly, "you'll find my suggestions in my semi-annual report. I detailed several roads that would save us time in fire-fighting, dollars and cents in logging and reforesting. I also outlined some other projects—"

"Which were ignored," Gus Runkle finished blandly, "and now you're sore about it. If you wanted the Park Service, why didn't you join it? This is the High Rock Timber Company. I'm interested in getting out logs, to hell with everything else."

Runkle checked himself and looked around at the sleeping men; some of them were beginning to stir. "I understood you were having trouble with some of your men. I think I see the reason." He turned to Johnny Blondo. "Find Wilson for me."

Johnny Blondo spread his feet wide and tapped the bowl of his pipe in his left hand. "You find him," he said. "I'm like Lasher. I just quit."

A fire-fighter emerged, running from the timber. "We need help," he called.

"What's the trouble?" Link moved quickly to meet him.

"A couple of men have been hurt bad. We were blasting out a stump. Something went wrong. The powder exploded too soon."

Link swore softly. Inexperience prob-

Tramlin came down in the small of Runkle's back.

ably. When the fire went out of control, they had been forced to round up men wherever they could find them. He had tried to see that responsible men were placed in charge of each crew, but apparently someone had slipped and there had been an accident.

Johnny came after him on the run. Together they found them a hundred yards down the trail. Four men were carrying the injured pair on a couple of improvised stretchers. One of the men was holding a rag pressed to his face. He took it away for Link to see. His front teeth were missing and his lips were smashed and bleeding. He was badly dazed. The other man's eyes were closed. He groaned with each jolting step.

Johnny whirled. "I'll get a pickup and driver ready. They need a doctor."

Tramlin followed along with the injured. "Who was using the powder?" he asked.

"Him." One of the men nodded at the man with the broken mouth.

"Had he ever used powder before?" Link questioned.

"I don't know," the stretcher bearer answered sullenly. "Some big shot in a gray suit came screaming down there for

us to show some life. It happened right after he left."

LINK'S jaw jutted. Runkle! In theory the logging chief had no authority over fire-fighting crews. That all came under the forestry department's jurisdiction. In actuality though Runkle seemed to have authority over everything and everybody.

They loaded the injured men in the truck, then Link and Johnny walked back toward the campfire. Red Lasher was standing there alone, scowling at the ground.

"You got a place where you can use me?" Lasher kicked at the ground with his toe.

"Huh!" Link glanced shrewdly at the old logger.

"We got a fire to lick, then I'm blowing," Red affirmed.

"Good," Link said and there was relief in his voice. "There should be a truck load of new men in any minute. I'll put you in charge. Take them down to the Iron Springs mill and start swamping out a break. It may not get down in there, but we'd better play it safe."

"What about the outfit Runkle sent down into the Horseshoe?" Lasher asked.

Tramlin felt anger explode and slide through him like a hot poker. He jumped over a fallen log and faced Lasher. "You mean while Johnny and I were busy he sent a crew down there?"

"Seems that way," Lasher answered. "He told Wee Willie Wilson to take twenty-five men and the pumper and get down in there."

"Hell! Wee Willie is only a time-keeper," Johnny Blondo exploded.

"Was," Lasher corrected. "Willie was never sure what he was except for saying yes to the man with the biggest stick."

"Where's Runkle?" Link asked.

"Took the station wagon and followed along," Lasher answered.

"And the girl?"

"Went with him."

A gust of wind came whipping down and spilled the cooking fire over its rock enclosure. In the distance, the flames shot from a burning tree and there was an arc of light flashing through the air like a blazing cannon ball. Another pitch-filled snag had exploded. With the wind coming up that way, pretty soon there would be another and another. Link felt a prickle of fear hit him.

"I'm going after that crew down in the Horseshoe," he announced decisively.

"In that case I'll deal myself a hand and go along," Johnny grinned.

"I thought you quit," Link replied.

"Did." Johnny's face was bland. "Just rehired myself for the duration."

Link walked over and aroused one of the sleeping men, spoke hurriedly, came back, nodded to Johnny and together they climbed into the remaining pickup and started down the rutted, twisting trail.

THE CAMP was on the top of a rounded dome and to the south of the main blaze. The trail led north and west along a ridge, dipped down and would finally take them into the Horseshoe itself, a gouged out canyon that slid back horseshoe fashion into the mountains, and fell away rapidly at the open end down to the valley floor below. It was a one-way trail in and out. It went to the upper rim of the timbered section and no further. Earlier in the season they had built a spur of track up from the Iron Springs mill in the valley into the Horseshoe, with the expectation of logging it, but the road, as Link had suggested, had never been completed.

Trees, their trunks black and stripped of foliage, swayed in the wind. Here and there a snag still burned, but it could do no damage and the crews had by-passed it to get at the main blaze.

Johnny closed his window against the smoke. "We need rain. That's the only thing that will ever stop her. It's too big for men now."

Link nodded agreement and stepped down on the throttle. It was still three miles down into the canyon and the road was rocky and pitted. All along were fresh signs where the heavy pumper had

barely scraped through.

The wind and smoke were coming stronger all of the time. There were times when it seemed to pack solid against the pickup, then it swirled away and they drove clean and free in the night until the next gust hit them.

Presently the trail turned from the ridge and made a sharp dip to the west. They had less than a mile to go, but the wind was sucking up the walled canyon as if it were a chimney and blackened embers tumbled out of the yellow rolls of smoke and splatted against the windshield.

"If they were thinking straight we'd be meeting them coming back," Johnny said.

"Maybe they got down in there ahead of this fresh blow," Link reasoned. "If they did they won't feel it until it's too late. It will come sweeping over the top and hit just about where we are now."

In the dark they nearly hit the square outline of the station wagon before they saw it. Link pulled out around it and up along side. There was no one in it.

"That guy belives in making it tough for himself," Johnny announced. "He leaves the wagon here and takes Old Whiskers' daughter on foot down into that mess. If she gets an eyebrow singed—"

"Listen," Tramlin said and slid his window down. "The pumper is running. They're set up at Diamond Springs."

BECAUSE it was his business to remember such things as trees and rock formations and the contour of the country, Link Tramlin had the picture of the place as clearly in mind as if he had been looking at it from an airplane in mid-day. He shifted gears and shot the pickup forward.

They found Wee Willie and his crew fanned out from the Springs. Willie was here, there, everywhere, shouting orders of his own, relaying Runkle's bull-like commands. He was filled with importance but a trifle scared and his face brightened visibly at the sight of the foresters.

"You think we can get a fire line that will hold?" he questioned anxiously. "The wind is shifting fast."

"Call your men together, Wilson." Link ignored the question. "We're getting out of here."

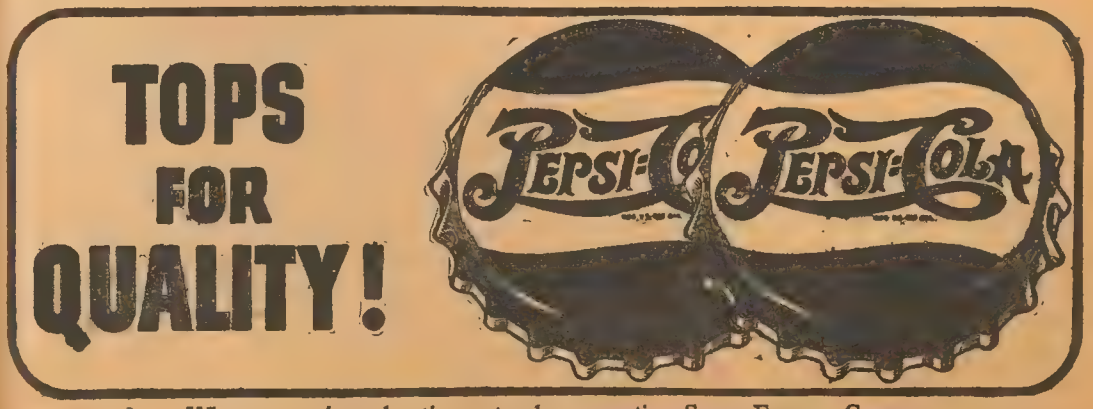
"Did Runkle say that?" Wee Willie demanded.

"You want to keep on living don't you?" Link asked.

Runkle came storming up. Old White Whiskers' daughter was still with him, but she was having her difficulties. Cutout play shoes and silk slacks weren't designed for forest wear, but Runkle had no time for such minor details now.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"We're pulling out while we can," Tramlin informed him. "You have several thousand dollars worth of equipment down here, not to mention lives. You



went over my head to bring them in, now I'm taking them out."

Runkle said, "Tramlin, you're fired."

"After we get out," Link acknowledged.

"You're presuming things, my friend," Runkle said. "The fire is still below us."

"Here," Link said, "but look over on your North wall."

"Our road cuts back to the South," Runkle argued stubbornly. "I'm thinking of these logs to be saved."

Before Link could answer, a forest giant, that had been storing pitch for a century or longer, exploded like a shell, and a dozen trees around it burst into flames.

"A few more of those and you'll have your story pretty complete," Link informed him.

"All right, I'll admit it's to the South of us, but it's a long ways from here." For the first time there was an uncertain note in Runkle's voice.

Link Tramlin sensed it and crowded his advantage hard. "Fire travels up hill faster than a horse can run, if there's a wind behind it. Tonight we have the wind and the fire is big enough to create its own draft."

Another tree let go. "Why don't we have a fire line over there? That's your business," Runkle snapped.

"I marked it on the map and put in a requisition for crews. You refused to spare them."

"Okay," Runkle said, "but those same men got logs out that otherwise might be burning tonight."

LINK seized up on that and used it for a hinge. "And unless we get out we're going to burn. That fire is moving faster than we can see from here. Up there on the ridge the wind is really hitting it off. It's been dry so long that this whole place is like a powder keg. Unless you want to explain to the company how you lost a pumper—"

Runkle's face was strained and dark, but he was smart enough to know when his chips were running out. He spoke through grim lips. "I still think you are mistaken. Naturally I was going to take Miss Comstock out and I couldn't very well leave while I asked others to stay."

Link glanced at Johnny Blondo. Johnny's face was as solemn as an owl's. Only his left eye lid dropped and that was almost impreceptible. No one fooled Johnny Blondo very long.

In his own mind Link reflected. "Mighty slick of Runkle. When we get out he'll use even this to his advantage."

Wee Willie, sensing the turn of the tide didn't wait for more. He broke away and began rounding up his crew. They could hear his high-pitched, important yell. "Come on, get moving. She's too much for us. We're pulling out."

The men came on the run, carrying their tools. In the glare of the pumper lights their faces showed that they had plainly felt it was useless right from the beginning. When a fire crowns it's too big for a handful of men.

"Count noses," Link directed Wee Willie. "Make sure they're all here."

It wasn't long, thirty minutes at the most, from the time Link and Johnny Blondo drove into the canyon until they were pulling out with Gus Runkle and Miss Comstock in the station wagon leading the way, then the pumper and finally Link and Johnny in the pickup, but during those minutes the fire really let go.

Gusts of heat were blasting down on them. Along the trail spot-fires were already bursting like rockets. It would take only one good stiff blow to suck them all together into a solid sheet of flames that would roll and tumble like a relentless ocean.

At the first turn the station wagon started to pull away, but the heavy pumper had to take it easy. The trail climbed steeply and most of the way it growled along in low gear. Another mile though, and their chances would begin to improve, Link felt.

The heavy timber was a weird place of smoke-filled shadows, high-lighted by the soaring light of the fires. For many of the men it was a new experience and they were loud in their demands for speed, but with the pumper speed was

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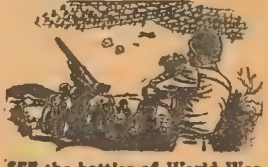

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out and there were too many of them for the pickup or even the pickup and the station wagon if Runkle should wait for them. Link knew that he wouldn't.

IT WAS as if Johnny Blondo read his thoughts. "Gus Runkle sure pulled out of this game in a hurry. When things start getting hot, that baby fades."

"They're hot," Link affirmed.

They wrapped around an outcrop of rock and almost slammed into the rear end of the pumper where it had stopped, squarely blocking the road. They jumped out and ran forward to discover the cause of the trouble. Ahead of the pumper was the station wagon with its hood crushed beneath the trunk of a blazing tree whose tons of weight had crushed down across the trail, just as the station wagon was racing under.

Runkle and Miss Comstock were already out of the wrecked car. In the flickering light her face was frightened, but she showed more composure than Runkle. He was babbling: "Another tenth of a second and that thing would have come down on us. We'd been crushed. God this is awful."

Johnny said, "Shut up Runkle, you're not hurt even if your blood is yellow."

The men came crowding forward and their eyes were bright with fear. They saw their escape route cut off. They were on the verge of panic. Once that hit them they would scatter like quail ahead of a shotgun.

Link felt his own throat constrict when he looked up. In the cab of the pickup part of the picture had been hidden, now he could see it all in its stark reality. Flames were racing through the tops of the trees and smoke was boiling into mountainous clouds. The entire blazing forest was closing in on them.

He made his decision in a hurry. There wasn't time to cut the fallen tree into sections and clear a path through. "Follow me and keep together," he commanded. "Those of you who have flashlights use them. We're going cross country to the railroad." He remembered seeing a flat car blocked off on the end of the track. If they could get to that and start it rolling down grade they had a chance, but it would be a race. They had to beat the fire to the wooden trestle that spanned the creek, splitting the Horseshoe from North to South.

"Johnny, take Miss Comstock," he directed. "If necessary carry her."

"I can walk," she retorted spunkily.

"We're going to run," Link said and started quartering away from the fire.

Smoke filled the air, choking them, blinding them. All around was the heavy, ominous roar of the fire. It rolled after them like an avalanche. Burning brands showered down on them. Men stumbled, fell, struggled to their feet, but they followed Link blindly, eagerly. He was their way out.

THEY traveled a mile that way. They went down through a narrow ravine and up on the other side. Exhaustion began to overcome fear. Men lagged. Their pace was slowing to a walk.

"Wilson, help Johnny with Miss Comstock. Carry her and take the lead. Keep heading for the track. Both of you know the way."

He dropped behind and jerked his heavy belt from its loops. It wasn't a bluff. The tired men took one look and put renewed interest in their running.

"Another half mile does it," Link encouraged.

A man tripped, fell and lay still. Link hoisted him to his feet and kept a firm hold on his arm. His own heart was banging at his ribs. He wondered about Runkle, but the chief logger was well to the fore front of the runing crowd.

Up ahead he heard a shout. The first ones had reached the track. Only a few more steps and they were to the flat car. Link had told them about that while they had been running. Now they tumbled aboard and lay stretched flat, gulping air into their tortured lungs.

"I'm glad they don't know what may be ahead," Link thought grimly enough. "Once we cut lose there'll be no stopping until we get clear to the bottom of the valley. If the trestle is gone—" He pic-

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tured its timbered frame, a hundred feet above the rocky floor of the ravine. Those tarred beams would spew flames like a blast furnace. The bridge was still a mile down the track.

The fire hadn't reached the section of the track where the flat car was, but almost immediately the track curved sharply to the south and the fire had been rolling that way for some little time.

When the last man climbed aboard Link grabbed a piece of fallen timber from the ground and knocked the blocks away from the wheels. The car groaned, but it didn't move until he climbed aboard and shoved the timber through the spokes of the rusty wheel and loosened the brakes.

The car quivered and jerked. Link felt it start to move down the grade, picking up speed with each turn of the wheels. The track was rough and uneven. It gave a sickening roll to the car.

Runkle lurched forward. "I hope you know what you're doing." His voice was hollow with fear.

"If I don't," Link said quietly, "we'll all be dead before very long." He stood there with the timber thrust in the brake wheel, swaying with the motion of the car, braking it what little he could on the tight curves.

Their faces became grimmer.

THEY thundered around a turn and directly a dozen voices started screaming. Forty rods down grade the trestle was plainly visible in its own light. The fire had beaten them to it. Tongues of flame were shooting up from the heavy timbers and on the far side of the ravine a solid wall of fire lined the track.

"Stop it, in the name of heaven stop it!" Runkle crawled back, clawing at the brake wheel.

"Shut up and stay down," Link pushed him back and flung the timber away.

"You fool!" Runkle howled and hurled himself forward.

In the half light of the fire Link saw the man's crazed rush. Runkle was trying to knock him backwards off the car. He caught Runkle's arm with both of his hands and twisted it down and around, at the same time he struck Runkle full in the chest with his own driving shoulder. Runkle was a big man, fully thirty pounds heavier than Tramlin. He went down hard, but crazy fear was turning him into a wildcat. Before Link could pin him he lashed out with his heel. It caught Link in the groin, doubling him.

Then Runkle was on his feet swaying drunkenly with the roll of the car. He smashed down at the back of Tramlin's head with both of his fists. Tramlin shifted and took the twin blows on his right shoulder. He grabbed one of Runkle's flabby legs jerking and twisting all at once. Runkle went down hard again and rolled over on to his face. Tramlin came down in the small of Runkle's back with his own knees and with the edge of his hand struck down across the back of Runkle's neck. The chief logger stiffened and lay still.

Tramlin heard a high-pitched woman's scream. He looked up. Johnny Blondo was struggling with Old White Whiskers' daughter. "You've killed him," she screamed. "You'll kill all of us."

"Lie down!" Link yelled above the screech of wheels and the thundering roar of the fire. "Lie down flat and cover your faces."

A terrible blast of heat hit him and he felt the skin crack and peel from his face. Smoke was blinding him. He felt, rather than saw the careening car hit the burning trestle. It flung him to his knees. All around him was the clang of wheels on hot rails and the consuming roar of the fire.

They shot across the blazing trestle like an arrow. They poured on down grade through the fire, running wild, but the car was still on the track and they were getting out.

Wee Willie Wilson came crawling back toward Link. "Gosh," he said in a voice filled with admiration. "You play rough when you get excited." He glanced briefly at Runkle's still form.

"He'll be all right," Link said briefly, "when we get to some water."

He took a flashlight from one of the men and sprayed its beam over the car

as it began to slow down. Carefully he counted noses. They were all there.

USUALLY when Old White Whiskers Comstock wanted to see a man his secretary sent a summons for the man to come into town. There Comstock would let him sweat in the outer office sometimes a half day at a stretch before he gave him an audience. Old Whiskers himself hadn't set foot in the timber country in better than a year.

That was why Link Tramlin spilled the makings of a cigarette he was building when he saw him standing as straight as a tree in the door of his own small office a week after the fire.

"Morning, Tramlin," he spoke through his white whiskers, while his quick eyes scanned the place. "Just so you don't get any queer ideas about me coming way out here, it wasn't my doings. It was Nell's fool notion." He nodded to the same girl who had been out there in the fire with them, but now she looked strangely different, more beautiful in her city clothes than she had that night. "It's closer for you to come to town," he added bruskly.

"I was coming tomorrow," Link said, "but I have them right here." He reached inside his desk.

"What?" the president of the High Rock Company asked.

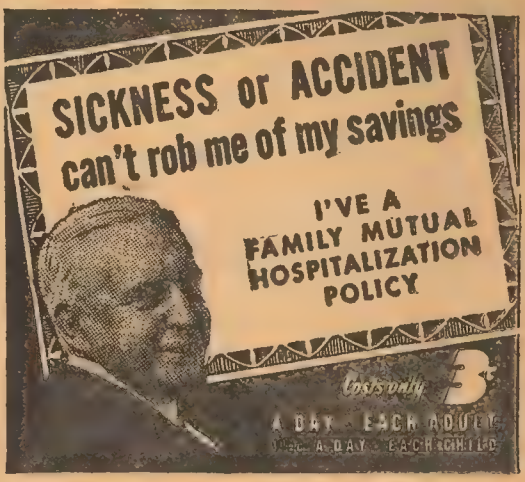
"Our resignations, Johnny Blondo's, Red Lasher's, and mine."

"You boys got better jobs?" Old Whiskers asked pleasantly enough.

"Not yet," Link said shortly.

"You will. Good men usually do." He changed the subject. "Now about that semi-annual report of yours. Don't read the things myself. I can see what I can see and I know when the company is making money. Nell, here read the whole thing to me last night though. It sounded real pretty. Now if a man could work a little of that in as he went along—" J. B. Comstock stood very straight and square. "Don't get any notion though that I'm going whole hog for it."

"Well—" Link sat there trading him



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stare for stare.

"We're unifying the company, putting this out here all under one heading. Timber. That covers a pile of sins. You want it?"

"What?" Link asked.

"The job. Timber supervisor."

"Where does Gus Runkle fit in?"

J. B. Comstock chuckled. "He's in town waiting for me. Probably been there a good half day," he paused significantly. "There's no hurry. Train doesn't leave until midnight. He's traveling on a one-way ticket."

The company president nodded toward the resignations. "Better forget those things. You'll need all the good men you can get."

Without realizing it, Link nodded agreement. In the back part of his mind he was visualizing a big job, one of the biggest he had ever tackled, but with his eyes he was seeing a different picture, Nell Comstock.

Parson On the Prod

(Continued from page 27)

complained. Rifles cracked behind.

"You don't have to—Slim and the rest are larruping along!"

"I can't hear. My ear drums are shattered."

And then he saw the Lazy-N riders, guns blazing, swoop over the crest. There'd be no stampede, and no herd cutting that day.

Gilman rubbed his aching shoulder, and his battered face. One eye was swelling shut.

"Incredible," he mumbled, thick-lipped. "A shotgun carrying so far. Literally throwing a horse from its feet." He wiped his brow.

"*Shotgun?* Darling, that's pa's old .60 caliber Sharps carbine, he used to knock buffalos off their feet with it, I *thought* you were loco!"

"I judged from the size of the barrel that it was a shotgun," he told her. "With my wretched markmanship, I felt that a rifle would be quite useless. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried to, but you snapped me off. Oh, your face is swelling terribly—let me kiss it and make it well—"

But before the cure was completed, old man Nagel, coming up the slope, bawled for the world to hear, "If'n you got to lallygag, don't do it on the skyline, it don't look right, and being skylined is a damn' tenderfoot's trick anyways."

Later, Gilman said to Nagel, "It was pure coincidence. She fairly forced me to take a hand, she fired first, you know. But I am glad I did not commit homicide."

"You done a lot worse, you kilt some good hosses; if'n you was worth your salt, you'd knocked off the skunks that was a-riding them! But like you say, it was fool luck. Fellow don't allus have women folks to make him stumble in the right direction."

And that, Gilman told himself, as he rolled up in his blankets that night, was a truth not unworthy of Plato or Aristotle. If it hadn't been for Cora, he'd burrowed into the ground and closed his eyes. . .

CHAPTER VIII

Re-enter Eve

CORA made a bee line to do some shopping in War Paint Gulch; with a boom, it was better than using the mail order catalogue. Gilman, who began to see why she'd been afraid to stay alone at home, let Ah Hing take charge of him. As it was, he had a sweaty hour of it, to keep the cowpunchers from dragging him into a saloon.

Ah Hing was going to ask his *tong* brothers for news from Dripping Springs, so Gilman, rather than face the roaring town alone, went along.

They had hardly gone a block when Gilman went cold from hearing a familiar voice: Watson Barstow was on the prowl. He fairly bowled Ah Hing into the alley between a saloon and a drug store.

"I saw him— I can't be mistaken," he moaned. "That day in the haystack, he was near enough."

"How Missy Bastow knowee you comee Wa'Pain Gutch?"

"From those cattle thieves!"

Ah Hing admitted that this was possible.

And at *tong* headquarters, to whose ante-room Gilman was grudgingly admitted, Ah Hing learned the worst: "Thass light, him come lookee, him askee elvelybody, catchee Holas Wibbel Gilman, pleachee-man, Bible-talkee man, evely week him askee." Then, bright and beaming, "You stay, my flien Sang Chung Lee, him say, OK, pleachee man velly nice. Catchee loom, catchee glub, my catchee Missy Nagel, tellee him."

That night, Cora came to *tong* headquarters. "You can't hole up with these heathens. You're perfectly safe, back at the Lazy-N."

"No, it is intolerable. That scoundrel will hunt me down. He is bent on vengeance. I cannot bring his wrath upon you and your father. He must by now know that I rode with the Lazy—N. Ah Hing's tong-brothers have already heard all about the outrage. If I go back with you, you folks will of course defend me—"

"Well, of course! Look what you did!"

"Even a divinity student has certain pride. I am mortally weary of imposing on others."

"Can't you ever forget that D. D. business?" she flared. "There's a Mexican priest, Father Francisco, he can straighten a horse-shoe with his bare hands. Clergymen don't necessarily have to be weaklings, and you're not, you've built

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up marvelously, you're just burdened down by your own imagination!"

She could not talk him out of it. She left with eyes red, and head high.

The following day, when the trail drovers had left, Ah Hing came to tell Gilman, "Missy Bastow goee way, lookee velly solly, face velly long."

"Very well, Ah Hing. I'll go to a hotel."

"All-light, goee now."

THE following day Gilman got a job as clerk in the Traders & Miners Bank. He'd be safe, as waggling guns was discouraged by a pair of hard-faced guards. And with so many Chinese laborers in town, Ah Hing couldn't help but get prompt warning of Barstow's return. Though in all probability, Barstow had given it up as a bad job, when he failed to find him with the Lazy-N crowd.

To his amazement, working in the bank proved to be oppressive. For the first time in weeks, his eyes hurt. When he spoke of this to Ah Hing, the Chinaman jabbered and smiled, and said, "Velly nice in bankee, savvey how hidee money. You stay."

Traders & Miners was the only bank in War Paint Gulch; and thus, though he was surprised, he realized that there was nothing unusual about the meeting: Eve Stirling came up to the cage to deposit a check.

For a moment, incredulity widened her eyes. "Why Dr. Gilman. Of all people! Oh, how nice to see you. You're the picture of health. I hardly knew you without your glasses, and you're so tanned and you've put on weight."

By then, Gilman had recovered enough to swallow his heart, and wonder why he'd ever been thrilled by Cora Nagel.

"What brings you to town, Miss Stirling?"

She smiled bewitchingly, and held her left hand for him to see that she no longer wore a diamond. "I found a teacher to take my place. My plans were changed, oh, in several respects."

He glanced at the check. "So you're teaching here?"

"The school is so much nicer! Lovely trustees."

That night, they had dinner at the Buckhead Grille. Later, in a livery rig, Gilman took the lovely blond for a drive. Her cultured voice was a marvel to hear. For the first time, in many weeks, he was aware of how he had missed the refinement of the east. However, he still didn't enjoy being caged in a bank.

Just how he got up courage, he couldn't figure out, but after casually taking a half hitch of the reins about the whipstock, he got one arm hitched about Eve Stirling. She was amazed, but didn't protest too much.

"From the first sight of you, I—ah—admired—believe me—"

And when eloquence failed, he kissed her. He had learned something useful at the Lazy-N. "I hope—I mean, my prospects at the bank—"

"Oh, Dr. Gilman—"

"Call me Horace. I'd be honored."

"This quite sweeps me off my feet—please—I'm fairly breathless—please give me time to think—you're surprising—"

She was right. He was surprising even to himself.

Later, she told him, "Mr. Barstow and I quarreled. I was shocked when I learned that he had been guilty of such high-handed conduct, such unmitigated brutality. I told him that he had to find you, at all costs, and make amends."

"Ah—er—um—he came seeking me. I was . . . ah . . . riding for the Lazy-N. I thought, naturally enough—"

Gilman licked his lips and choked a little. His face was red, and he wanted to be far away. He remembered, and cringed from remembering, that Cora's shotgun, threatening the seat of Barstow's pants, had saved him from discovery.

"Yes?" Eve prompted. "You were gone when he called?" When he made a noncommittal sound, for he hated to tell a barefaced lie, and hated as much to

tell the truth, she continued, "But why didn't the Nagels tell him when you'd be back?"

"They did not understand," he said with literal truthfulness, "that Mr. Barstow came with, ah, an olive branch. They are splendid people, the salt of the earth, but suspicious because of feuds."

"He was here not long ago looking for you," she went on. "You see, though I returned his ring, I didn't tell him that I had irrevocably rejected him. Of course, I can't consider such a brute, but I wanted to help you. Tell me, Horace, have you any plans for selling the Rafter J-G?"

"The property is so run down. The cattle have all been stolen. To attempt to operate it—"

"Of course. But you needn't fear to return to Dripping Springs, he'll not dare hurt you."

THAT NIGHT, as he sat in his hotel room, thinking it over, Gilman's head began to split. He could not doubt that Eve would accept his proposal, if he repeated it. She'd spent an hour telling him how well she could cook. She knew that he'd soon be cashier at the Traders & Miners. She was so weary of teaching overgrown numbskulls. . . And cultured persons were so scarce in the west. . .

Once she gave Watson Barstow the final gate, he'd stay on his own range, which was a good way from War Paint Gulch.

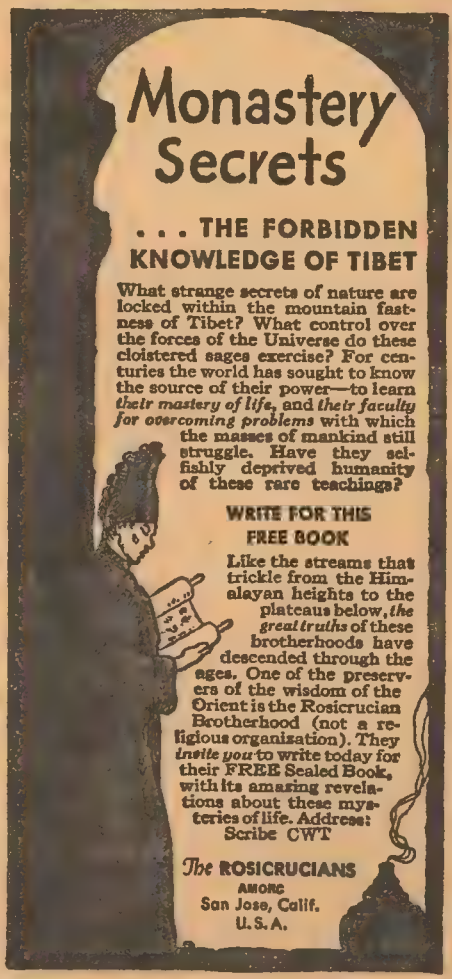
Well after midnight, he went to find Ah Hing, who spent every evening at a fan-tan game.

The Chinaman listened. After considering all the possibilities of the Barstow propositions, he said, "Plitty lady, velly solly for sick man."

"But I am not feeble any more. She was surprised."

"Missy Bastow suplize, not happy, How lunnee with plitty lady, velly bad lunnee with Ah Hing when Missy Bastow blungee gun."

Bitter Chinese realism knocked the moonlight and roses from Gilman's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brain. Worse yet, and what Ah Hing had been too tactful to mention, was that this, if ever, would be a case of hiding behind a woman's skirts.

Smiling, Ah Hing pidgin-Englished the old proverb, "Strike a snake without killing it, the snake turns and bites."

"But what can I do with him? Every time I've got into a fray, accident—you understand, luck—saved me. Even if I could defeat him at shooting, I should hat to kill a man deliberately. It is not right."

"Some timee, velly good, killee man. You go-ee, tly and see, maybeso no killee him, no killee you."

"But how? Good gracious, Ah Hing—"

"Can beatee Tiger, if brother helpee. You allo samee brother, hitee snake."

Gilman made up his mind. He got a piece of paper, and penciled two notes: one to the bank, and one to Eve Stirling. In the latter he said ". . . I cannot permit myself to profit by your subterfuge, I am compelled to tell Watson Barstow that you have promised to marry me; and if I am presumptuous in this, then at least, that you have no intention of ever marrying him. With profound and eternal devotion. . . ."

Ah Hing took Eve's note to her hotel, leaving it at the desk. Then, he headed to the railroad with Gilman, but this time, not to steal a handcar.

There was a peculiar grimness around Gilman's eyes.

CHAPTER IX

The Showdown

GILMAN, back in Dripping Springs, sat in Ah Hing's laundry, to wait for Bartow to ride into town. More than conventional pride compelled the meeting he planned. He was sick of being sheltered. And now that he faced a crisis which might develop before noon, or might hang fire for several days, all his past marched by in review.

He was scholarly because he liked to be; it was his nature. Perhaps he could have taken pride in the calling he had repudiated had such profession not always been falsely associated in his mind with frailty, incompetence, awkwardness. But now he had to prove himself against men who had no armor but their wits and their strength and their endurance: and that such a test was now necessary was only because his resentful years had made it so.

Gilman unbuckled his pistol. Force, as such, was not the answer. Barstow, after all, was not the prime enemy; what he had come to deal with was something intangible, something existing in himself.

Nine. . . ten. . . Eve must long since have got his note . . . he counted the strokes of the clock in the belfry of the massive dobe church. . .

Then Ah Hing came in, shadow silent.

"Him get shavee in babel shop, gottee gun hangee on wall, got soapee on face, you talkee, him gettee up tooo quick, gettee neck cuttee off—*ssst!*"

Gilman headed for the barber shop. At the hitch rack was a long-legged bay with black points, and silver-mounted gear. For the first time, he clearly saw the faces, and the details of Dripping Springs. For a moment, he felt like a ghost, since no one paid any attention to him.

Then he got it: they didn't recognize him. He bore little resemblance to the stoop-shouldered, sallow, pinched-faced pilgrim who had squinted through thick-lensed glasses.

This prepared him for his step into the barber shop.

Pancho looked up from giving Barstow a final dab of lather. "You are next, *senor*, be pleased to take the seat."

"Thank you. While you are giving your razor the last touch, let me speak to this gentleman."

"*Seguramente*. With *Senor* Barstow's permission."

"What the hell, can't a man get a shave in peace?"

"Your gun is on the wall, Barstow. I'm Horace Gilman. I have come to talk to you."

Pancho let out a yelp and darted for

the rear. This was no show of his. Barstow sat up with a jerk, but not before Gilman had added, "I have no gun. No more than I had the day you ran me off my own property."

"What do you want?" He yanked the bib from his neck, and got to his feet.

"I came to tell you," Gilman answered, with a firmness and deliberation that sounded as strange to him as it did to the big man who faced him, "that you needn't hunt me to make amends. I met Eve Stirling and told her she need not protect me by deceiving you."

"What's that?" The voice from behind the bank of lather indicated that Barstow didn't know whether to be pleasant, puzzled, or tough. "You saw Eve? What do you mean, deceive me?"

"She is sick of your brawling and arragance, she would not marry you if you were the last man on earth, she—ah—strung you along out of pity for me—which I cannot tolerate. All the more so since she has promised to marry me, you—you—" And then he shouted it: "You—damned uncouth clown!"

GILMAN turned on his heel and stalked out. He had reached the board walk when Barstow, regaining the power of speech and motion, yanked the door open and roared, "You've not got a gun, you better get one, you better get one quick, you yellow-bellied slick-ear, get one and turn around and face me! You hear, get a gun, or I'll drill you anyway!"

A crowd was gathering. They began to identify Gilman. There was a murmur, first of astonishment, then of applause. "What's he been a-drinking . . . pilgrim, hell, he don't look like no preacher . . . sure it's the same jigger . . . well, I be damned . . ."

Then a woman's voice cut through the mumble.

"Watson! Watson! Control yourself, don't you dare—"

Gilman turned. Eve Stirling, who must have got the note far sooner than he had

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expected, stepped between him and Watson Barlow.

"Eve, this is none of your affair! You've been stringing me along, eh? Well, I'll have his hide!"

Gilman drew a deep breath. Eve's appearance left him no choice. "If you want my hide, try for it when I step out of the laundry, my gun is there!"

Ah Hing met him just inside the door and handed him his Colt. "Plitty lady tly stoppee him, gettee soapee all over."

"Is she still trying to save me?"

Ah Hing peeped. "He shovee away, goee back for gun."

As Gilman paused in the deep doorway of the Chinaman's dobe, Barstow came raging from the barber shop. His vest and sleeves were spattered with lather. He was lathered to the cheek bones. His voice, shaking with fury, completed the grotesque picture of madness.

"Come out, you —— ——!" he bawled, "Or I'll come in and get you!"

He started for the laundry, which was half way down the block, and on the opposite side of the street. The crowd had scattered. Ah Hing prompted, "Shootee now!"

Gilman yelled, "Watch yourself!" and took half a step.

Barstow blazed away, one-two. The slugs spattered against the dobe. He didn't miss by much, but he missed. Gilman fired. An answering slug jerked his shirt. Then old man Nagel's words came back to him. He advanced, deliberately, to meet his man; an instant's pause, a shot that made Barstow jerk back, apparently hit, but not seriously. Gilman moved forward again.

A slug smacked past his ear. Barstow was going wild. Another kicked up dirt a yard short, spattering Gilman with bits of rock. But Gilman continued the march. He still had four cartridges to unravel, and he was nearly close enough to settle it.

Then he knew that it was all over: Barstow's hammer snapped on an empty chamber. The Colt dropped to the ground. His hands went up. "Don't shoot," he stuttered. "I'm hit."

"So am I. Now we're going for a walk. When you're in front of me, let your hands down, and wipe the soap from your face. You look funny. Ah Hing, get his hat and pick up that pistol, and see if you can find a shotgun."

Barstow asked, "Where are we going?"

"For a walk. To the Rafter J-G. Keep moving."

"But you can't walk—"

"I can. I did, once. If your high-heeled boots are uncomfortable, you may take them off. March!"

STUBBY JORDAN and other old timers of the Rafter J-G had gathered, had seen, had marveled. They mounted up and trailed along. "Here's a hoss, preacher," Stubby said.

"We are walking. For the good of Barstow's soul."

And over the blistering desert Barstow marched, his high heels weaving and bending with every agonizing step.

Six hours later, they reached their destination. The cowpunchers were waiting. Gilman said, "We're going to the dam. I hear Barstow dynamited it. Bring a shovel, someone."

When he got his prisoner to the pond, which was now little more than a mud pool, he commanded, "All right, get busy and build it up. Give me that shotgun, Ah Hing, I still have no confidence in pistols. Get some lanterns, we have only three more hours of daylight."

He seated himself under a cottonwood to watch the big man sweat and shovel . . .

Toward sunset, a livery rig came clattering up. Eve Stirling got out. Gilman looked up, raised his hat. "Oh, hello, darling. We'll soon take time out for refreshments. Won't you join us?"

"Horace, you're brutal! You're vindictive! Haven't you made your point? I never thought this of you, a gentleman."

Horace Gilman drew a deep breath. "My dear, I've not made my point. You have made it for me, this moment. He is a brute, so am I, and I like it. My Chinese friend has proved that if you

strike a snake and do not kill it, the snake will turn and bite. But with all respect to Confucius, I do not give a damn! Put down your shovel, Barstow. Let the lady give you a lift back to town, She's welcome to you."

"Why, Horace! I came to keep you from being brutalized."

Gilman got up. "I'm sorry, but I cannot any longer stomach people who run around saving everybody."

He watched them drive away. Then he said to Stubby Jordan, "If you want to ride for me, start tomorrow. Ah Hing and I are going to see old man Nagel about buying some Lazy-N critters."

"Feeders, or fer increasing and multiplying?"

"Both, Stubby. Yes, and fix those broken windows. You know how fussy women are about such things."

"You mean—" Stubby gaped. "Cora Nagel?"

"I learned a good many things at the Lazy-N."

"That's gospel, preacher! First thing you know, you'll be as good a man as your Uncle Joash."

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Sheriff of Salvation

(Continued from page 47)

"Farrel Brown?" Ames murmured. "Where is Farrel now?"

The barber shook his head. "I've been tryin' to keep McLain, Mulvaney, an' the others in sight. Farrel had a shave an' he went up the street."

AMES CALDWELL saw Jeff come out of the Red Lion and pause on the porch. The Silver Bell was on an angle across the Square, a distance of about seventy-five feet. The five saloons facing the Square provided sufficient light so that a person crossing it would be recognized immediately.

The nester moved across the Square, walking with the long, ungainly gait of a farmer. His tall figure was outlined against the bright lights from the Red Lion Saloon. Ames Caldwell watched his shoulders swing easily, and then he stepped off the walk himself. Sam Cannivan had just come out of the swinging doors of the Red Lion.

"Here it comes!" Ed Murphy ejaculated.

Ames saw Cannivan light up a cigarette, and then the Rainbow hand spotted McLain half way across the Square. Cannivan hesitated one instant until he saw the gun at McLain's side, and then he disappeared inside the saloon.

A moment later Mulvaney broke through the door, face flushed, his hat on the back of his head, a cigar gripped between his teeth. Beckhurst came behind Mulvaney, hand already on his gun.

McLain stopped at a distance of thirty feet. Ames Caldwell, coming up behind him, could hear the nester's voice plainly even though he spoke softly.

"Reckon you've been lookin' for me, Mulvaney," he said.

Two men had been sitting on rockers in a corner of the Red Lion porch. Both of them got up hastily and bolted inside the door. Ames angled off to McLain's right, and it was then that Mulvaney spotted him. The Rainbow owner pointed a finger.

"You in this, Caldwell?" he asked.

McLain didn't look around. Ames pulled up a dozen feet to the nester's right. He had both thumbs hooked in his gun belt, and he watched Sam Cannivan edging out to Mulvaney's right. Cannivan was heading for a porch pillar which would give him some protection when the shooting started.

"That'll be far enough, Sam," Ames said mildly. "Pull up."

Lace Mulvaney was grinning now, rolling the cigar in his mouth. He said something to Beckhurst, but Ames couldn't hear the words. The left-handed man went down the two steps to the board walk and stepped to the corner.

Cannivan measured the distance between himself and the porch pillar. It was about six feet, and a man could make that in two strides. Ames Caldwell read Cannivan's mind. He had an idea Sam would be the one to open the pot.

One thing still wasn't clear in Ames' mind, and he liked everything in order. Farrel Brown was supposed to be throwing in with himself and McLain, but Brown wasn't in sight.

Jeff McLain took a step backward, and he said softly:

"Don't figure on Brown, Caldwell."

McLain had no time to say more because Sam Cannivan's right hand dipped. Ames Caldwell had been watching this man almost exclusively, and he drew almost as fast as Cannivan. Sam got off the first shot and Ames felt the sting of the lead as it grazed his right cheek.

He steadied on Cannivan and squeezed the trigger as Sam lunged for the porch pillar. Cannivan reached the pillar, but instead of stopping there, tumbled head first over the low railing and onto the walk, a .45 slug through his heart.

Ames heard McLain's gun boom simultaneously with Mulvaney's. He heard Mc-

Lain's short gasp as he was hit, and then Ames swung on Joe Beckhurst. Joe's left hand was very fast, but in his anxiety to get off a bullet before Ames could turn on him, Beckhurst missed his first shot completely.

Ames hit him in the right shoulder, spinning him half around, and it was then that Beckhurst lost his nerve, and started firing wildly. Ames heard McLain's gun crack again, and without looking at the nester, he knew McLain was down on both hands, hit badly, but still in the fight.

CAREFULLY, Ames steadied on Beckhurst, an almost savage joy shooting through him. He was not Caldwell the mediator now, but Ames Caldwell, the law of Salvation.

Joe Beckhurst tried to shoot and hop around the corner, but he was pretty badly hurt. Two of his shots went high over Ames' head, and then Ames shot him through the middle with the third slug in his cylinder. Beckhurst went down on hands and knees, the gun still in his hands. He was shaking his head stupidly like a dog, not quite sure what had happened.

Lace Mulvaney was still up, the cigar in his mouth, unhurt. He had his six-gun leveled at McLain. The nester had fired twice, both shots missing the mark, and once again Ames Caldwell marveled at the courage of this farmer. McLain was no gun man, but he wouldn't run.

Knowing that he had no chance of stopping Mulvaney's final shot, Ames swung his gun anyway. Another weapon roared from behind him—a heavy gauge Sharp's rifle, and Ames saw Mulvaney cringe at the shoulders, break in the middle, and then tumble forward down the steps, that slug for McLain still in the cylinder. Ames had one thought. Farrel Brown had come into the fight.

Jeff McLain was trying to get to his feet when the shot sounded from the alley to the left of the Red Lion Saloon. Ames Caldwell saw the orange flame, and he heard the impact of the bullet as it struck

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McLain's flesh. The nester went down with a small groan, the gun slipping from his hands.

Another slug came out of that alley, this one knocking Ames Caldwell's left leg from beneath him. Even as he hit the dust of the road, he opened up with his six-gun, the bitterness raging in his heart at this unseen killer in the alley. He fired three times, steadying the gun on the spot where the flash had come from.

A man stumbled out of the alley—a big man, pawing wildly at the air with his hands, leaning forward off-balance. He went down on hands and knees, and then rolled forward on his right shoulder. He lay there on his back, face turned up toward the light, the yellow glow from the Red Lion Saloon revealing the two small bullet holes in his face—one under the right eye, and the other through the forehead. It was Farrel Brown.

IN the back of Ed Murphy's barber shop fifteen minutes later, Ames Caldwell fitted the pieces together. Jeff McLain lay on a cot across the room, Doc Elliott having taken three pieces of lead out of him, and made the nester promise that he wouldn't get on his feet for at least a month. Ames had a bullet hole through his left leg just above the knee, but the wound was clean.

Rose Caldwell sat by McLain bathing his face with a damp cloth. The shock had not left her face as yet. Ames had seen her carrying the Sharp's rifle, running up toward them. She'd killed Mulvaney.

McLain started to speak. Farrel Brown's bullet had gone through his left side, and he'd lost plenty of blood.

"Living up near the Rainbow range," McLain said quietly, "I saw some things. I knew Mulvaney was rustling stock, and I suspected that someone was behind him. I wasn't sure it was Brown."

"That's how Farrel built up his herd," Ames muttered. "Mulvaney was a blind for him. A lot of the beef Mulvaney stole was sold through Farrel Brown, and no one thought of suspecting Farrel."

"Brown got Mulvaney to drive me out of the Canyon," McLain went on. "He wanted to see Mulvaney make me crawl in town, right in front of Rose. He figured I'd run and then he'd have a clear path with Rose."

"An' he told you he'd stand behind you," Ames growled. "He did, an' he damn' near got you!"

Citizens of Salvation were crowded into the front of Murphy's barber shop, looking through the door. Ames Caldwell raised himself on his elbows. He looked at the faces in the doorway and he said quietly.

"Reckon you boys better move along. Jeff here needs a little sleep." He was surprised at the tone of voice he used. Ordinarily, he would have joked, kidded them along. Now he smiled, also, but there was something else present, and the men of Salvation recognized it.

"Hell," Ed Murphy grinned, "Ames sounds like he's the sheriff o' this damn' town!"

"Damn' right he is," a man chuckled from the rear.

Ames Caldwell moistened his lips and lay back on the cot. He had a nice feeling, that of a man who liked his work!

Arbitration at White Rock Spring

(Continued from page 57)

she continued, "before Link comes to and takes you apart."

"You'd better vamoose," Baldy's voice warned. "You ain't see nuthin' yet. Link's a reg'lar wildcat when he's riled."

The sheriff moved to his horse. "It's plain to see you're too upset to talk reasonably," he said angrily. "I'll see you after you've cooled off."

A vast contentment filled Link as Wat-

son headed for town. This was the old Effie, right back in fighting form; the Effie he thought had been lost. He moved his head cautiously. She was a wildcat in her own right when riled, and he didn't know how she would take that spanking.

But Effie's hands were soft and cool on his ears and something soft brushed his face. Thus encouraged, he sat up. The crew were hiding their blushes behind one another. "How about chousin' those critters of Turley's back where they belong?" he demanded.

As one man, the crew sighed with relief and hit the leather.

"How do you feel?" Effie inquired solicitously.

"Pretty good," Link admitted. As a matter of fact he felt marvelously well; Effie was looking at him with the same warm light in her blue eyes that had been there when she wore pigtails. He figured a rap on the head was a small price to pay for that. His glance fell on the still burning shack. "Maybe I was a mite hasty about that," he observed. "It would have been great for a honeymoon."

Effie made no pretense of misunderstanding. "We could build another one," she said with Western directness. "But, if we did, do you think Turley would try to bother us again?"

"I reckon not," Link said with finality. "Especial, if he goes to the land office. I filed a homestead claim on this section yesterday."

"You think of everything," she murmured wide-eyed.

Link looked at her with quick suspicion; this sudden meekness was unnatural. It would last, he decided, until the effects of the spanking wore off. After that, she would be her old, natural self. It would be wonderful scrapping his way through life with Effie. It would keep a man on his toes. "Say," he asked suddenly, "how did you know I was throwing Turley off?"

"I didn't," Effie answered. "Dad said it would be a good idea to ride over here this morning."

"I'll be damned," Link murmured softly. "And I thought he was gettin' weak in the head!"

UP on the ridge, Old Man West climbed stiffly into the saddle and bumped his rheumatic elbow in the process. He damned it heartily as the fat old cowpony carried him downhill, but the pain couldn't entirely erase his grin.

Halfway home, he caught up with Idaho. "Did you see the fireworks?" the waddie asked.

"I sure did," Old Man West admitted. "Link called the turn when he said she oughta be paddled. I figgered, if she got him riled enough, he'd take on the job, and boy, he did!"

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Trial by Fire

(Continued from page 65)

found Mike Cameron still sprawled on the floor. For one frightful moment, it seemed that the gambler was dead—that he, Dave Murdock, had killed a man. But then Cameron groaned.

Dave bent and caught the man by the shoulders, and dragged him—from the room, into the pasageway and along it. Even in the passageway, flames were eating through the rocks. They crept up the bulkheads, licked out at Dave and his limp burden. The clothing of the two men caught fire, and Dave had to use his hands to slap out the flames.

Cameron now regained consciousness, and his eyes filled with horror. He tried to help himself, but his condition was weakened by his head injury. Once he gasped. "Save yourself, Murdock!"

That impulse, to save himself, was almost greater than Dave's resolve. Only the picture of Joyce Shelby's fear-filled eyes kept him from abandoning Cameron. Dave did not want to face the girl—alone.

The once-proud river packet was one solid mass of flames and rolling smoke when Dave Murdock staggered to deck with his burden. He could no longer see and so had to stumble blindly in the direction of the railing. Cameron and he were alone on the *Western Belle*, except for the dead, but they were seen from the water and from shore and a great shout of encouragement reached out to them. Dave dropped Cameron over the side, let him fall like a burning brand. His own strength was so far gone that he feared that he could not heave himself over. When he finally jumped, his burning clothes flared up like a torch. But then the water closed about him.

HELP came from miles around, brought by the red glow of the burning packet. Dawn brought another river boat, the side-wheeler, *Susannah*, and it took aboard the survivors. There was a doctor among the *Susannah's* passengers, and he treated the injured. Dave Murdock was one of the most severely burned, and he was dressed with a healing ointment and swathed with bandages. Even his eyes, painfully but not seriously burned, were bandaged. Dave had other care than the medico's, for Joyce Shelby had taken over the chore of nursing him.

It was Joyce too who saw that he had shelter once the survivors were put ashore at Westport. She had a carriage take him to her sister's home. . . . It was a pleasant home, Dave knew at once, even though he could not see it. Barbara Shelby welcomed him. She also relieved Joyce in caring for him. Barbara's voice was much like Joyce's, and he imagined that she must be as lovely as her sister.

Gradually, as Dave grew stronger and his pain diminished, Barbara spent more time with him than Joyce. She fed him his meals, made him take his medicine, helped the doctor when the bandages had to be renewed.

Days passed, and one week ran into another. Dave wanted the bandage removed from his eyes, quite sure that he could see again. The doctor urged him to wait, and so Dave had to go on guessing what Barbara was like.

"I'm years older than Joyce," Barbara told him, when he asked. "And an old maid. Nobody ever wanted to marry me, because I'm as homely as Joyce is beautiful." She sighed heavily. "I guess nobody will ever want me."

Dave heard her giggle, and knew that she was neither homely or very old.

And he was right. The day his bandages were removed, he looked upon Barbara Shelby and saw all the fine qualities he had believed Joyce possessed. Barbara was young, only eighteen, and she was more than pretty. Many men would want Barbara, unless Dave Murdock quickly claimed her. And Barbara wanted him to claim her. The look in her eyes, her shy smile, told him so. . . .

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Please rush Personalized Pop-Up Cigarette Cases checked off below. If not delighted I may return in 5 days for money back without question.

_____ Pop-Up Cases at $1 each.

☐ I am enclosing $_____. Send postpaid.
☐ Send C.O.D. I will pay postman $_____ plus postage.

Check Colors and Initial Desired.

☐ Jade Green ☐ Cadet Blue ☐ Red ☐ Ivory ☐ Black

Initial_____ Initial_____ Initial_____ Initial_____ Initial_____

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Joyce and Mike Cameron were there for the unveiling, as they all happily called it. And when Dave could really see again, after being dazzled by Barbara, Joyce held up her left hand. There was a gold wedding band on the third finger. Her cheeks were flushed with happiness.

"We were married this afternoon," she said.

And Mike Cameron said, almost sheepishly. "We've made our last river trip." He held up his hands. They were no longer slim and smooth and deft, able to deal from a deck; they had been so badly burned, they now were bent and stiff. "And I've dealt my last game of faro. Joyce and I will have to earn a respectable living, from now on."

"A good thing," said Barbara. "But you might have waited and made it—" She broke off abruptly, caught up by shyness and blushing.

So Dave Murdock, filled with the excitement of high adventure once more, finished for her. "—a double wedding," was what he said.

Uniform of the West

(Continued from page 4)

But worse still were the hilarious remarks around him about "Ol' Virginy" being unable to stand on his two legs after a few drinks. Calmly, Fennimore picked himself up, brushed the dust from his clothing.

"I done it a-purpose!" he roared. He raised a hand. "I hereby christen this here camp Virginia City!"

And the name stuck.

While purchasing fabrics from Levi Strauss, Jake Davis related an incident concerning one of his customers over in Virginia City. This customer was known as Alkali Ike. Alkali Ike was a prospector. He always packed rock specimens, mining tools, whiskey flasks, and all his worldly goods in his pants pockets. Alkali was a cocklebur in Jake Davis's undershirt. The prospector's periodical visits to Virginia City always meant a bad day for Jake.

"Gol-darn it!" Alkali Ike would snarl, stamping into Jake's shop. "Good-fernothin' tailors! Why in purgatory cain't yuh sew up these gosh-blamed pants pockets so's the consarned dad-blamed things won't rip?"

Jake Davis got pretty tired of this. Alkali left his pants with Davis. It is hoped Alkali put on another pair, but, anyway, he went out to make the rounds of Virginia City saloons. Davis decided he'd fix Ike once and for all.

He took the pants to a local harnessmaker and had the seams reinforced with copper harness rivets.

When Ike returned, he was in no condition to see the pants, much less the copper rivets. On Alkali's next trip to town, Davis was prepared for Ike's usual outburst. But this time the prospector was grinning with satisfaction.

"Looky here, Jake!" he beamed. "These here pockets ain't got a single rip in 'em. They're just as good as new!"

Levi Strauss listened to Davis's story with interest. "You know, that has possibilities," he said meditatively. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll invest my own capital, and we'll see if we can't get you a patent on that rivet idea.

The result was that the patent was granted in 1873 for seventeen years. After that it was renewed for another seventeen years. And Levi Strauss placed Jake Davis in charge of his overall factory.

WITH the exception of one improvement, Levis have remained pretty much the same since the copper rivet was added. A couple of Levi men went hunting. One of them bagged a bobcat.

"Look at those claws," one of the hun-

ters remarked. "Concealed, so a man wouldn't even know they were there."

A lot of good ideas have been cooked up around a campfire. These hunters returned to San Francisco with the idea that the back rivets on Levis should be concealed—so not to scratch furniture or fine saddles.

Word spread about these he-men's pants for rough Western work. It ran along the coast to the cow country of Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas. It went into the lumbering sections of Northern California, Oregon, Washington. Railroaders, cowpokes, miners, lumberjacks—all took to them fast. . . .

"Doc" Dinsmore, a rider for the Keim spread of Fresno, California, was standing before a saddle shop one day. A drummer for a made-to-measure suit house approached.

"Interest you in a suit of clothes, cowboy!" the drummer asked.

"Nope," Doc promptly replied. "Reckon I already got the best tailor in the world."

"It's a pretty big world," the salesman reminded him. "Who *is* your tailor?"

"Levi Strauss," said Doc. "Been makin' my clothes fer nigh onto forty year!"

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SONG POEMS wanted to be set to music. Send poem for immediate consideration. FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS, 421 Beacon Bldg., Boston 8, Mass.

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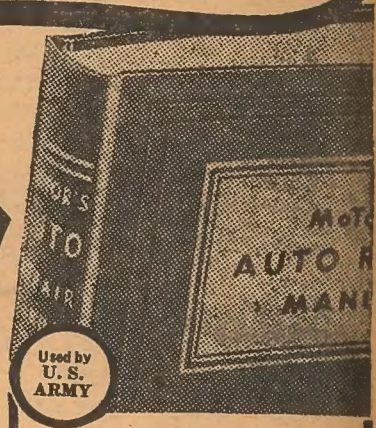

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